



# JEEVADHARA

## BLESSED ARE THE MERCIFUL

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Edited by

Selva Rathinam

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A JOURNAL FOR SOCIO-RELIGIOUS RESEARCH

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## **Blessed are the Merciful**

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## Editorial

*Misericordiae Vultus* (The Face of Mercy) is Pope Francis' Papal Bull for the Extraordinary Holy/Jubilee Year of Mercy. The term 'bull' comes from the Latin '*bulia*' meaning 'bubble' or, a rounded object which indicated originally the metal capsule used to protect the wax seal attached with a cord to document of importance to attest its authenticity.<sup>1</sup> Nowadays, the term indicates all papal documents of special importance. It is 'jubilee' because the Church views the jubilee as a period for remission of sins and universal pardon as we see in the Bible that during the Jubilee Year the debts are cancelled, the slaves are freed and the land reverts to its original owner (Lev 25:10; 27:24), and therefore, the Church on this occasion focuses particularly on God's forgiveness and mercy.<sup>2</sup> It is extraordinary Jubilee because unlike the ordinary jubilee which takes place every 25 or 50 years, this particular jubilee had not been predetermined long before. The year is 'holy' because it offers opportunities for spiritual growth. Through this bull Pope Francis wants to make the mission of the Church more evident as a witness of mercy as "mercy is the very foundation of the Church's life" (MV 10).<sup>3</sup>

The papal bull points out to the opening and the closing dates of the holy year and the ways in which the year can be spent. The Year began with the opening of the Holy Door in St. Peter's on the Solemnity of the Immaculate Conception on December 8, 2015, and will end on

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<sup>1</sup> See <http://www.rcsocialjusticett.org/downloads/parishlinkmay2015.pdf> accessed on 16/1/2016.

<sup>2</sup> See [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Extraordinary\\_Jubilee\\_of\\_Mercy](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Extraordinary_Jubilee_of_Mercy) accessed on 16/1/2016.

<sup>3</sup> *Misericordiae Vultus*.

November 20, 2016 on the Solemnity of Christ the King. The opening also coincides with the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the closing of the Vatican II.

On the Solemnity of the Immaculate Conception of the Blessed Virgin Mary, Pope Francis solemnly inaugurated the Jubilee Year of Mercy with Holy Mass. As a symbolic gesture he opened the Holy door of Mercy which reminds us of the heavens opening the door of mercy and showered the fullness of grace on Blessed Virgin Mary through the words of the angel “hail, Mary, full of grace” which changed the course of human history. It also reminds us of the opening of another door which the Fathers of the Second Vatican Council opened to the world fifty years ago. Thus, this Holy Year becomes a gift of grace and even today the grace of God can transform the human heart and become a cause for joy to all of us.

In his homily on the Inauguration of this Jubilee year, Pope Francis said<sup>4</sup> that the feast of the Immaculate Conception expresses the grandeur of God’s love. Not only does he forgive sin, but in Mary he even averts the original sin present in every man and woman who comes into this world. This is *the love of God which precedes, anticipates and saves*. The beginning of the history of sin in the Garden of Eden yields to a plan of saving love. The words of Genesis reflect our own daily experience: we are constantly tempted to disobedience, a disobedience expressed in wanting to go about our lives without regard for God’s will. This is the enmity which keeps striking at people’s lives, setting them in opposition to God’s plan. Yet the history of sin can only be understood in the light of God’s love and forgiveness. Were sin the only thing that mattered, we would be the most desperate of creatures. But the promised triumph of Christ’s love enfolds everything in the Father’s mercy. Further, the Pope emphasized that the Immaculate Virgin stands before us as a privileged witness of this promise and its fulfillment. For Pope Francis, passing through the Holy Door means to rediscover the infinite mercy of the Father who welcomes everyone and goes out personally to encounter each of them. This will be a year in which we *grow ever more convinced of God’s mercy*.

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<sup>4</sup> [http://en.radiovaticana.va/news/2015/12/08popefrancis\\_homily\\_for\\_inauguration\\_the\\_jubilee/1192758](http://en.radiovaticana.va/news/2015/12/08popefrancis_homily_for_inauguration_the_jubilee/1192758)



The opening of the Holy door also reminds us of another door which the Fathers of the Second Vatican Council opened to the world fifty years ago. The Council, for the Pope, was an encounter, a genuine *encounter between the Church and the men and women of our time*. An encounter marked by the power of the Spirit, who impelled the Church to emerge from the shoals which for years had kept her self-enclosed so as to set out once again, with enthusiasm, on her missionary journey. It was the resumption of a journey of encountering people where they live: in their cities and homes, in their workplaces. Wherever there are people, the Church is called to reach out to them and to bring the joy of the Gospel. Further, the Pope elaborated that the Jubilee challenges us to this openness, and demands that we not neglect *the spirit which emerged from Vatican II, the spirit of the Samaritan*, as Blessed Paul VI expressed it at the conclusion of the Council. He ended his homily by saying that may our passing through the Holy Door today commit us to making our own the mercy of the Good Samaritan.

Thus, in this time of increasing evil, Pope Francis' answer to evil is mercy, following the teaching of St. John Paul II who, in his last book, *Memory and Identity*, wrote that the "limit imposed upon evil, of which man is both perpetrator and victim, is ultimately Divine Mercy."<sup>5</sup>

In the first article of this issue of *Jeevadhara*, "The Lord's Extraordinary Mercy in the Hebrew Bible," James Dabhi portrays how the extraordinary suffering of the people elicited the Lord's extraordinary mercy in the Hebrew Bible. In the second article, "Jesus, the Gospel of Father's Mercy, Naveen Rebello through the analysis on some mercy texts in the Gospels highlights how Jesus reveals the mercy of God through his words and his deeds and thus becoming the face of the mercy of God. In the third article, "Mercy and Compassion in Interfaith Perspective," Francis Gonsalves invites us to realize that mercy and compassion are virtues that belong to the common heritage of the world's religious traditions and wants us to commit ourselves to a 'globalization of compassionate solidarity' in our common quest to

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<sup>5</sup> See <http://www.thedivinemercy.org/jubilee/thebasics/Why-did-Pope-Francis-call-the-Jubilee-Year-of-Mercy.php> accessed on 21/3/2016.

build communities of peace, forgiveness and harmony. In the fourth article, "Responding to the Ecological Crisis based on the Biblical Creation Stories (Gen 1:27-28)," Selva Rathinam revisits the theology of Genesis Creation stories and provides us with the value based human response to today's ecological crisis engineered by the greediness of the affluent nations in contrast to the mercy of God who has provided what all we need for our healthy life in our environment. In the final article, "Compassion as Commitment to Christian Life," Surekha draws inspiration from *Evangelii Gaudium* and develops compassion as Theological Praxis for Christian Life.

I thank sincerely all the above who have contributed articles to this issue. My special thanks to my President Secretary Ms. Annett and my friends Dr. Kuruvilla Pandikattu, SJ and Sujay, SJ who helped me in preparing the manuscripts. It is hoped that these articles may help us deepen our understanding of the mercy of God. May this year become for each one of us a favourable time for experiencing the abundant mercy of God, so that we may go out to heal wounds and to offer everyone the way of forgiveness and reconciliation as our Holy Father Francis has underscored.

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# **The Lord's Extraordinary Mercy in the Hebrew Bible**

**James B. Dabhi**

The extraordinary suffering of the people calls for the Lord's extraordinary mercy. When the family of Jacob went through an extraordinary misery in Egypt the mercy of the Lord liberated them. Although the stiff necked people through the idolatry of Golden Calf turned their back to the Lord, with an extraordinary mercy the Lord forgave them and established covenant relationship with them to make them into one people, one nation on Mount Sinai. The Lord made and kept up the covenant with an individual David even when he deviated from his fidelity to the Lord through the sins of adultery and murder. The non-Israelite race in the City of Nineveh would have been wiped away from the face of the earth as per the plan of the Lord. However, the extraordinary mercy of the Lord makes the Lord to about-face. Extraordinary mercy means mercy that is not logical, not rational, not measurable, not repayable, and not expected, yet gratuitously poured. The Lord cannot but outpours the Lord's extraordinary mercy on each one, irrespective of caste, creed, culture, color, country, or gender. Dr. James Dabhi, SJ holds a doctorate in Biblical Theology from the Santa Clara University, USA. At present he is the dean of the theologate of Gujarat Vidya Deep (GVD).

## **Introit**

In a shared-prayer session of a closely-knit group of faithful, a wife for about two decades and a mother of four children acknowledged the magnanimity of her husband, who forgave her. She was infatuated with her male colleague in her workplace. She was enamored so much of her illicit and illegitimate relationship that she crossed the limits. Her husband, realizing his wife's predicament, augmented his

love for her all the more and took recourse to ardent prayer and severe penance. True love triumphed. The moment she became cognizant that she was charting an extremely risky course, she confessed to her husband. No sooner did she admit her liaison, he pardoned her wholeheartedly. I was moved to hear the testimony of that couple in that prayer that was organized as part of the Extraordinary Jubilee Year of Mercy.

## Foreword

Calendar Year 2016 has been declared as the Extraordinary Jubilee Year of Mercy by Pope Francis. With a humble intention to furnish paradigm of the Lord's extraordinary mercy to the august readers, I peruse the Hebrew Bible (the Old Testament). The Hebrew Bible depicts the history of Israel right from the inception. Two annotations need to be appended. 1) The history is not narrated in the modern sense of the term 'history,' namely, a sequence of objective events. Rather, the history is presented from theological perspective. The history of Israel from theological point of view signifies the interpretation of each event in the lives of Israelites in relation to their Lord. The term 'The LORD' translates into English the Hebrew personal name YHWH of the God of Israel. That history depends only on the Lord; yet, the Israelites as a whole play a dominant role. 2) The Nation Israel serves as a sample to evince the Lord's doing to the entire human race. Let me paraphrase the annotation two, the Lord demonstrates the Lord's interaction with all human beings through the Lord's interaction with Israel. Therefore, through reading and rereading, musing and mulling over any pericope of the Hebrew Bible, the faithful may encounter the Lord. To respect the allotted space limit, I concentrate only on one episode each of the Lord's extraordinary mercy to one family, one nation, one individual, and one ethnic race other than Israel. In other words, I choose events from Pentateuchal, Historical, and Prophetical Sections of the Old Testament.

## **The Lord's Extraordinary Mercy to One Family (Exod 15:1-18)**

While mapping the span of writing the Hebrew Bible, biblical scholars mention that the very first event that was composed has the poetic



genre and is now preserved in Exod 15:1-18. The time of composition of this poem is 12<sup>th</sup> century B.C.<sup>1</sup> The event narrated in this poem is the Crossing of the Reed Sea, which is dated around 1250 B.C. Thus, the time gap between the happening of the event and the writing of that event is just the minimum. Probably, the writing took place immediately upon the accomplishment of the event. That event may have been so spectacular, vivid, and thrilling that the beneficiaries of it erupted in such spontaneous praises of the Lord.

Those who escaped from Egypt and crossed the Reed Sea are the descendants of Jacob, the son of Isaac, the son of Abraham. According to Exod 12:37, these descendants numbered about six hundred thousand men, without counting children. Since Jacob had been awarded the new name Israel (see Gen 32:28), his descendants came to be known as Israelites. As the history of Israel indicates, Jacob had migrated with his family from Canaan to Egypt at the behest of his eleventh son Joseph in around 1700 B.C. Genesis 46:27b reports that migration, "all

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<sup>1</sup> Durham surveys the scholars' opinion with regard to dating. Adolf Bender argues that an artificial antiquing and terms showing the influences of Aramaic set the poem in the postexilic period around 450 B.C. Paul Haupt notes that the poem should be considered a postexilic liturgical hymn for the Passover, dated around 350 B.C. Cross has posited a date in the tenth century B.C. for the conversion of the poem from an oral work into a written work, and a date in the late twelfth or early eleventh century B.C. for its composition. Freedman has suggested a twelfth-century date for the composition of the poem. Durham gives his opinion that the oldest elements of the poem may certainly be dated, insofar as basic narrative and perhaps also rhetorical terms are concerned, very close to the time of the event itself. See John I. Durham, *Exodus*, Word Biblical Commentary, edited by David A. Hubbard, Glenn W. Barker, John D. W. Watts, and Ralph P. Martin, number 3 (Waco, Texas: Word Books, Publisher, 1987), 203, 209-210.

Blenkinsopp opines that it is still frequently maintained that this composition is one of the most ancient poems in the Hebrew Bible and it has even been claimed that it was written by an eyewitness of the event. See Joseph Blenkinsopp, *The Pentateuch: An Introduction to the First Five Books of the Bible* (New York: Doubleday, 1992), 159.



the persons of the house of Jacob who came into Egypt were seventy.”<sup>2</sup> The Israelites flourish numerically and materially in Egypt during their protracted sojourn. “The time that the Israelites had lived in Egypt was four hundred thirty years” (Exod 12:40). Biblical scholar Michael D. Coogan reconstructs the history of Israel based on the mention of the name ‘Israel’ in the hymn on a victory stele, erected by the king of Egypt Pharaoh Merneptah (1213-1203 B.C.). The father of Pharaoh Merneptah is Pharaoh Rameses II (1279-1213 B.C.). Pharaoh Rameses II lived 90 years and ruled for 66 years. He was known for building edifices. During his time, a large number of Semitic people (the descendants of Shem, the son of Noah) known as Hapiru or Hebrews were employed in Egypt at construction sites. Since the Israelites spoke the language Hebrew, they came to be known as Hebrews. The exodus may have taken place around 1250 B.C., during the reign of Pharaoh Rameses II. The father of Pharaoh Rameses II is Pharaoh Seti I (1294-1279 B.C.). Pharaoh Seti I may have begun the persecution of the Israelites in Egypt and Pharaoh Rameses II may have perpetuated it as mentioned in Exod 1:8-22.<sup>3</sup> The persecution formed violation of two fundamental human rights, viz., right to earn and right to give birth to a son. After having lived for four centuries rather comfortably in Egypt, the Israelites are pushed to such precariousness that the Lord has to apprise Moses, “I have observed the misery of my people who are in Egypt; I have heard their cry on account of their taskmasters. Indeed, I know their sufferings” (Exod 3:7). Moses’ reluctance to become the instrument in the hands of the Lord to emancipate the family of Jacob from the tyrannical clutches of the king of Egypt, “Who am I that I should go to Pharaoh, and bring the Israelites out of Egypt?” (Exod 3:11), betray more the invincibility of the Egyptian Empire than his unwillingness to cooperate with the Lord.

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<sup>2</sup> All the biblical quotes in this project are from *The Holy Bible: The New Revised Standard Version: Catholic Edition* (Bangalore: Theological Publications in India, 2003).

<sup>3</sup> See Michael D. Coogan, *The Old Testament: A Historical and Literary Introduction to the Hebrew Scriptures* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006), 98-99.

Once Moses, accompanied by his elder brother Aaron, consents to the assignment of the Lord, he challenges the king of Egypt, "Thus says the LORD, the God of Israel, 'Let my people go, so that they may celebrate a festival to me in the wilderness'" (Exod 5:1b). The king defies the demand of the Lord, ensuing conflict of two rivals, the Lord versus the king of Egypt. The war of words between the Lord, represented by Moses and Aaron, and the king of Egypt permutes into plagues and afflictions. Exodus 7 to 12 builds up a high-voltage drama, making the king more stubborn after each plague. Such a depiction inadvertently notifies that the family of Jacob in Egypt was beyond redemption. Not a single individual in the Egyptian Empire is mentioned who sympathizes with this oppressed family, except the princess who drew Moses out of water. No neighboring kings are listed who could possibly vituperate this violator of human rights. The Israelites had numerical strength compared with the natives of the land of Egypt, but that had no ability to deter the king from executing his fierce pogroms. The resistance of the king in the face of plague after plague from Exodus 7 to 12 displays his audacity and arrogance. In pursuit of the freed Israelites on the way to the Reed Sea, the king marshals six hundred picked chariots, other chariots, and army, notoriously parading his military acumen. All these cumulatively drive home one message, i.e., to be liberated from the noose of the Egyptian Empire was just impossible.

The family of Israel has no other option, but wail and whine on account of their taskmasters, multiple sufferings, and unjust oppression as described in Exodus 5. The Lord has compassion for this family. The Lord opts for the Israelites. However, instead of assisting the Israelites to become the oppressors, as is used to be in any social upheaval where the proletariat becomes the bourgeois, the Lord leads the Israelites out of the land of Egypt. The Reed Sea stymies the strenuous struggle for freedom. No one has ever heard of sea waters being divided. But they were divided. The Lord split the Reed Sea, creating a way for the multitude of Israelites to continue their onward march. The Lord accomplishes that incredible feat, employing Moses as the Lord's instrument. What the Lord wrought that night, the family

of Israel verbalizes in Exod 15:1-18.<sup>4</sup> The last nail in the coffin of Egypt's downfall was driven at the Reed Sea. The battle line was drawn between the Lord and the king of Egypt vis-à-vis the family of Israel. The king wanted to perpetuate the family's servitude; the Lord wanted to assure the family's rescue. The Reed Sea could have played a spoilsport as the family was disheartened and ready to surrender to the slavery in Egypt. In the nick of time, the Lord blew the waters to turn them into a heap and to congeal the bed of the sea (Exod 15:8). If the piled up waters served the family of Israel as an entrance to new life; they served the king and his army as an entrance to death (Exod 15:10). Why does the Lord perform so miraculous an act? In response, the family sings that the Lord has steadfast love for the Israelites (Exod 15:13). The steadfast love forms the hallmark of the Lord. The steadfast love prompts the Lord to take initiative to liberate, to persevere in the task undertaken, to accompany the victims, and, finally, to usher them into the freedom.

### **The Lord's Extraordinary Mercy to One Nation (Exod 32:1-14)**

The family of Israel has a prolonged formative period en route to the Promised Land, which constitutes the western side of the River Jordan in Israel of today. The family has to wade through the Wilderness of Sin, Wilderness of Kadesh, and Wilderness of Paran for the duration of 40 years. The family has some disenchanting confrontations with the indigenous tribes on the way (see Exod 17:8-16). However, the most extraordinary encounter the family has is with the Lord. At Mount Sinai, the Lord enters into covenantal relationship with this family, making it a nation (see Exodus 20-23). The treaty form that was

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<sup>4</sup> Durham analyzes the poem in Exod 15:1-18. The Lord is both the subject and the object of this poem, i.e., the poem is about the Lord and to the Lord. Verse 1b states the reason of praise. Verses 2-3 depict personal confession of faith. Verses 4-8 narrate the victory with allusions to the Lord's prior victory over the cosmic chaos-waters. Verse 9 presents the enemy's arrogant claim. Verses 10-12 describe the incomparable deeds and person of the Lord. Verses 13-18 convey that the Lord guides the Lord's people through their enemies to the place of their rest. See Durham, *Exodus*, 205-206.



adopted to depict this relationship between the Lord and the Israelites is known as Suzerain-Vassal treaty, which presented relationship between unequal partners and which was practiced in the Hittite Empire.<sup>5</sup> The Hebrew verb utilized in connection with the covenant is 'to cut.' Thus, the phrase 'to cut a covenant' is explained as referring to a ceremony that involved cutting an animal as a symbolic acceptance of the consequences of breaking the covenant. In other words, the inferior party that disobeys the stipulations of the covenant incurs death penalty upon the self. The phrase 'to cut a covenant' intimates a sacrifice, too, rectifying the covenant, which is mentioned in Exod 24:1-11. The Lord introduces the covenant to Moses as follows: "Thus you shall say to the house of Jacob, and tell the Israelites: You have seen what I did to the Egyptians, and how I bore you on eagles' wings and brought you to myself. Now therefore, if you obey my voice and keep my covenant, you shall be my treasured possession out of all the peoples. Indeed, the whole earth is mine, but you shall be for me a priestly kingdom and a holy nation. These are the words that you shall speak to the Israelites" (Exod 19:3b-6). Thus, the Israelites, as a nation, are intimately united to the Lord; Israel is the vassal and the Lord is the suzerain. Utmost loyalty to the Lord is expected from this nation after Mount Sinai pact. One of the concrete ways articulated to manifest this loyalty reads as follows: "You shall not make for yourself an idol, whether in the form of anything that is in heaven above, or that is on the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth. You shall not bow down to them or worship them" (Exod 20:4-5a).

Having entered into so solemn relationship with the nation, the Lord summons the leader of that nation, Moses, "Come up to me on the mountain, and wait there; and I will give you the tablets of stone, with the law and the commandment, which I have written for their instruction" (Exod 24:12). In response, Moses distances himself from the nation and sojourns on the mountain for forty days and forty nights (see Exod 24:18). During this period of time, the Lord instructs Moses about preparing the Ark of the Covenant, Tabernacle, and Priests'

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<sup>5</sup> See Rui de Menezes, *The Cultural Context of the Old Testament* (Bangalore: Theological Publications in India, 2009), 22-24.

Vestments. Besides, the Lord mandates Moses to ordain Aaron and his sons as priests. All these are portrayed in Exodus 25 to 31. To paraphrase, the Lord and Moses are busy chalking out minutest details of the worship for this newly-generated nation. Meanwhile, the nation undergoes disillusionment at the foot of Mount Sinai due to the physical absence of Moses. At the making of the covenant, the nation was replete with romanticism and euphoria. The nation had disproportionate and unrealistic self esteem that it would be able to worship the Lord without any tangible idol. Now, the nation realizes that with irretrievable Moses, it has to reconsider whether to persevere on this new path or to about-face. Exodus 32:1-14 narrates that the nation recedes to the idol worship by molding a golden calf. This idolatry forms the very first transgression of the nation en masse after the irrevocable treaty with the Lord.

Exodus 32:1-6 depicts what transpires between the nation and its second fiddle, Aaron. The nation compels Aaron to carve gods for it. The reason for such compulsion to Aaron is that these carved gods will have to lead the nation on, as its visible leader Moses is out of its radar. Aaron complies with the irresistible pressure of the nation and makes a calf out of gold supplied by the people. The golden calf is consecrated by a section of the people by solemn proclamation, "These are your gods, O Israel, who brought you up out of the land of Egypt!" (verse 4b). Aaron builds an altar before the golden calf and announces the following day as the festival to the Lord. On the festival day, the people offer sacrifices to this idol and make merry. Each citizen of this newly-constituted nation contributed in the corporate crime of idolatry, beginning with the act of manipulating Aaron to create gods and ending with the feasting in front of that idol.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Coogan has a different take on Exod 32:1-6. The golden calf is apparently not a symbol of another deity. The people exclaim that it is the gods, who brought Israel out of Egypt, but there is only one calf, and Aaron proclaims a festival to the Lord, who was the god who did bring Israel out of Egypt. Moreover, in the chronology of the narrative, the Decalogue had not yet been delivered to the people; so, they are unaware of the prohibition against making graven images. Further, the calf was understood as a pedestal for a

Exodus 32:7-10 reports reaction of the Lord at the waywardness of the newly-covenanted nation at the onset of its commitment. The Lord informs Moses of what is going on at the foot of the mountain. The Lord dissociates from the people. The dissociation is revealed in the locution employed by the Lord, referring to the people, "your people" (verse 7), instead of the usual locution on the lips of the Lord "my people." The utter perturbation of the Lord is inferred from the choice of words made by the Lord, "they have been quick to turn aside from the way that I commanded them" (verse 8a). Verse 7 commences with the phrase "The Lord said to Moses." Again, verse 9 begins with the identical phrase, "The Lord said to Moses." In between these two verses, Moses has not responded at all. Besides, verse 8 continues the Lord's communication. No other character enters to speak and, yet, verse 9 reemploys the same phrase, indicating that after apprising Moses of what has taken place, the Lord deliberates for a while before announcing the Lord's verdict apropos of the perversion of the people. The Lord evaluates the people, "how stiff-necked they are" (verse 9b), and, then, condemns them, "Now let me alone, so that my wrath may burn hot against them and I may consume them" (verse 10a).

Exodus 32:11-14 presents the prompt prayer of Moses on behalf of the nation. In his imploring, Moses poses a rhetorical question to the Lord, reminding the Lord that these people belong to the Lord alone. The Lord had freed them, expending quantum amount of the Lord's power and might. By annihilating the people at the mountain, the Lord may provide fodder to the Egyptians' speculation appetite that since the Lord wanted to eliminate these people from the face of the earth, the Lord led them out of Egypt. If such an imaginary taunting of Egyptians does not deter the Lord from extirpating the people, then Moses brings to the memory of the Lord the solemn oath that the Lord has made to the three patriarchs concerning progeny as numerous as stars and the property as vast as the land of Canaan. Not undermining

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deity. Thus, the golden calf may be interpreted as an alternative to the Cherubim and the Ark on which the Lord was invisibly enthroned. See Coogan, *The Old Testament: A Historical and Literary Introduction to the Hebrew Scriptures*.



the significance of Moses' supplication in the survival of this nation Israel, I assert that the extraordinary mercy of the Lord affords a fresh lease of life to Israel. Keeping Moses ignorant of what had occurred, the Lord could have exterminated the idolatrous Israel, but the Lord does take Moses into confidence. The cryptic motive of the Lord in letting Moses know may have been that Moses serves as the instrument to stir the mercy of the Lord and, in turn, the Lord outpours it upon the people. The Lord succeeds. No sooner did Moses intercede for the sake of the people, "the Lord changed his mind about the disaster that he planned to bring on his people" (verse 14). The Israelites have been experiencing the Lord since the entry of Moses into their lives as their leader. The Lord reveals the Self to them through concrete acts of history as the one who opts for the oppressed, opposes the oppressor, prevails over the tyrant, liberates the fettered, feeds the hungry, guides on the way to the Promised Land, protects from adversaries, and, climactically, binds the Self in covenantal relationship. All these acts cumulatively manifest the steadfast love of the Lord for the Lord's people. The covenant was meant to be preserved forever. Therefore, breach of the covenant would incur the death penalty on the guilty. Justice demands the death of those who jeopardize the covenant. The day the Israelites celebrated the festival after making the golden calf, the Lord would have demonstrated the Self as the Just God by eradicating every Israelite, but the Lord did not. By forgiving the nation as a whole, the Lord reveals that mercy constitutes the best way to express the steadfast love. Worship of the golden calf formed an extraordinary sin both qualitatively and quantitatively, qualitatively as it is committed on the heels of the solemn commitment of repudiating the idolatry, quantitatively as everyone in the Israelite camp participated in it. Therefore, extraordinary mercy of the Lord was awaited and before the nation becomes cognizant of the gravity of its gross error, the Lord exhibits the extraordinary mercy.

### **The Lord's Extraordinary Mercy to One Individual (2 Sam 11:1-12:15a)**

David, a shepherd youth, belonging to the tribe of Judah, was anointed king by the Lord to supplant King Saul from the tribe of Benjamin. In

Israel, the king was never a secular figure. On the day of his anointing or coronation, he was considered to become an adopted son of the Lord. As the adopted son of the Lord, he represented Israel before the Lord. As the vicar of the Lord, he represented the Lord before Israel. The king exercised priestly function, too. For example, King David officiated as priest, when he brought the Ark of the Covenant to Jerusalem, dressed in the priestly linen (see 2 Sam 6:14); he offered holocausts and communion sacrifices (see 2 Sam 6:17b); and he blessed the people (see 2 Sam 6:18). However, the chief duty of the king consisted in being a sentinel, guarding Israel's faithfulness to the covenant with the Lord. Besides, the king had to provide leadership to his people and peace from their enemies (see 1 Sam 8:20).<sup>7</sup>

After his anointing as king, David carries out certain momentous and incredible acts through the power of the Lord. For example, he subdues Goliath the Philistine (see 1 Samuel 17), saves the City of Keilah from the Philistines (see 1 Samuel 23), spares the life of King Saul in the cave (see 1 Samuel 24), and avenges the destruction of Ziklag (see 1 Samuel 30). After the suicidal death of the dethroned King Saul, David is acclaimed king by all the twelve tribes of Israel in unison. He makes Jerusalem the capital city of Israel (see 2 Samuel 5), providing political significance to Jerusalem. He brings the Ark of the Covenant to the City of Jerusalem from the City of Kiriathjearim (see 2 Samuel 6), offering religious importance to Jerusalem. At the culmination of all these, David is given a solemn promise by the Lord, "Your house and your kingdom shall be made sure forever before me; your throne shall be established forever" (see 2 Sam 7:16).

King David may have been cognizant of the disobedience of his predecessor King Saul, costing him his throne. King Saul was mandated to destroy all the Amalekites for having denied the Israelites passage to Mount Sinai, when the Israelites came up out of Egypt (see Exod 17:8-16). According to the judgment of Samuel, King Saul did not heed the voice of the Lord. As a consequence, King Saul was defrocked (see 1 Sam 15:1-23). Thus, King David is aware of his humble

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See de Menezes, *The Cultural Context of the Old Testament*, 95-96.

beginning, his crucial status as king, the constant accompaniment of the Lord in all his endeavors, and the untoward outcome of disobedience as it happened in the case of King Saul. Notwithstanding all these, King David succumbs to his inclinations versus his obligations. The biblical author known as the Deuteronomist details King David's sin in 2 Samuel 11. David fails to provide leadership to his mercenaries in the time of battle in the vein of neighboring kings. He shirks his responsibility to his substitute Joab, his military commander (see 2 Sam 11:1). David lingers on in Jerusalem, but, instead of becoming protector of the wives whose husbands serve at the frontiers, he becomes predator. He impregnates Bathsheba, the wife of Uriah the non-Israelite (see 2 Sam 11:2-5). When he was informed of his felony, David barges into series of acts to attribute the pregnancy to her husband Uriah by summoning him to the capital city. David abuses his absolute authority over both Joab and Uriah (see 2 Sam 11:6-7). David recommends Uriah to go home, but the latter does not comply. Uriah comes across more duty conscious than David. Uriah swears not to compromise with his military comportment in conformity with the Ark of the Covenant that represents the Lord and his companions on the border, though he is away from them.<sup>8</sup> In the last desperate effort to coax Uriah to sleep at his home, David extends Uriah's sojourn with him by a day and offers him royal banquet, making him intoxicated. David's ploy does not pay dividend (see 2 Sam 11:8-13). The pregnancy of Bathsheba could become sin if Uriah remains alive. His companions may be aware of his brief return from the battlefield. After the departure of Uriah from home for the battlefield, the Jerusalemites may attribute that pregnancy to him. Only Uriah knows that he has

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<sup>8</sup> Anderson supplies some relevant information. If soldiers on active duty were expected to observe sexual abstinence, then Uriah in obeying David's suggestion would have committed a serious breach of the ritual law. This is partly supported by Uriah's determined resistance to David's efforts. It is possible that such an infringement of war regulations may have been an attempt to eliminate Uriah by legal means, at the same time, attributing the paternity of the child to him. See A. A. Anderson, *2 Samuel*, Word Biblical Commentary, edited by David A. Hubbard, Glenn W. Barker, John D. W. Watts, and Ralph P. Martin, number 11 (Dallas, Texas: Word Books, Publisher, 1989), 154.



had no relation with his wife. David's coterie knows David's culpability. Bathsheba has already notified David that she carries his child in her womb (See 2 Sam 11:5). The Decalogue, at number six, states in unequivocal apodictic form, "You shall not commit adultery" (Exod 20:14), which is amplified in the Deuteronomic Code as: "If a man is caught lying with the wife of another man, both of them shall die, the man who lay with the woman as well as the woman. So you shall purge the evil from Israel" (Deut 22:22). If Uriah opens his mouth, it will spell doom for David; therefore, Uriah must be silenced at any cost. To save his skin, David plots to kill Uriah (against the Decalogue, "You shall not murder" Exod 20:13) in connivance with Joab, "Set Uriah in the forefront of the hardest fighting, and then draw back from him, so that he may be struck down and die" (2 Sam 11:15). David commits murder by proxy. Bathsheba becomes widow, but, simultaneously, becomes free to be wife of David. No one comes to know the intricacies. Bathsheba may have taken Uriah's death as intrinsic element of battlefield operation. Uriah's compatriots may have counted his falling as one more casualty of that day. The Jerusalemites may have honored Uriah's laying down of his life as martyrdom. For all, the entire episode is a tragedy turned into a melody as David marries the widow of Uriah (see 2 Sam 11:16-27a).<sup>9</sup>

The Lord has a different take on this event, "But the thing that David had done displeased the Lord" (2 Sam 11:27b). A poignant definition of sin can be composed from this response of the Lord, i.e.,

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<sup>9</sup> Anderson interprets 2 Sam 11:1-27a differently. Although adultery was a serious offense (see Lev 20:10; Deut 22:22), it is very likely that wives who committed adultery were divorced and perhaps humiliated, but they were not put to death during the pre-exilic period (see Hosea 2; Jer 3:6-14). Moreover, it would make a great deal of difference if Bathsheba were a victim rather than an accomplice. Even if death penalty were mandatory for men who were caught, it is highly doubtful that there was any court in Israel which could try and convict a king. Hence, Uriah could hardly have been a real threat to David, unless the legal implications were more serious than those described here, and if only the husband, not the community, was entitled to bring the charges (see Num 5:11-15). Consequently, it is far from clear why David felt it necessary to liquidate Uriah. See Anderson, *2 Samuel*, 155-156.

whatever incurs the displeasure of the Lord is sin. The Lord employs Prophet Nathan to awaken the slumbered conscience of David. Nathan utilizes a parable. This literary form has the ability to incite the audience/reader to elicit a verdict on the self unconsciously, while judging one of the characters in the parable. David condemns himself unknowingly. "As the LORD lives, the man who has done this deserves to die" (2 Sam 12:5b). Now, Nathan has the charge to make David aware of the seriousness of the series of his sins and the consequences thereof. David acknowledges, "I have sinned against the LORD" (2 Sam 12:13a). Instantly, David receives the response, "Now the Lord has put away your sin; you shall not die" (2 Sam 12:13b). So facile forgiveness is granted to David of the series of his despicable and ignominious offenses without making query of even an iota! Extremely astounding! The only rationale of so prompt pardon is the essence of the Lord's being that is revealed to Moses, "The LORD, the LORD, a god merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness, keeping steadfast love for the thousandth generation, forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin" (Exod 34:6b-7a). David remained the apple of the Lord's eye in spite of his iniquities because of the extraordinary mercy of the Lord. According to the tradition, Psalm 51 is attributed to David as his response to Prophet Nathan's castigation.<sup>10</sup> The Penitential Psalm 51 has thenceforth become the confident prayer of any repentant sinner.

### **The Lord's Extraordinary Mercy to One Ethnic Race Other Than Israel (Jonah 3:1-10)**

The extraordinary mercy of the Lord is not the heritage of the Israelites alone; Israel has no monopoly over it; even the non-Israelite nation can stake an equal claim on it. One of the 46 books of the Old Testament, the Book of Jonah, constitutes the glowing exemplar of the Lord's compassion to the non-Israelites. The Lord needs to respond

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<sup>10</sup> Anderson holds that in the Masoretic Text, there is a space after 2 Sam 12:13a, which may suggest a cross reference to Psalm 51, which is often regarded as an early commentary on 2 Sam 11:27b-12:15a. This may also be implied by the historical note in the heading of Psalm 51. See Anderson, 2 *Samuel*, 163.

to the exigency: so, the Lord commands Jonah, "Go at once to Nineveh, that great city." Jonah is entrusted with a concrete and pragmatic task, "cry out against it" (Jonah 1:2a). Jonah is made fully cognizant of the criticality of the issue by the Lord, "their wickedness has come up before me" (Jonah 1:2b). Nineveh is the capital city of the contiguous Assyrian Empire, which is the present day's Iraq. Jonah may have reminiscence of the Assyrian Empire attacking the Northern Kingdom of Israel in 722 B.C. and destroying it. The males of the ten tribes of Israel that lived therein were deported to Assyria, creating male vacuum, which was then replenished by Assyrian males. The Israelite females, being always dependent on males, were compelled to enter into marriage contract with these Assyrian males. The generation that was engendered had Assyrian fathers and Israelite mothers. The ten tribes of Israel became mixed breed and, thus, were considered the lost ten tribes of Israel. Such an inhuman act the Assyrians had performed against the Israelites. Later, in the same locale, Babylonian Empire usurped the power. In 586 B.C., the Babylonian Empire attacked the Southern Kingdom of Judah and destroyed the Temple of Jerusalem. The priests, prophets, and royals were taken to Babylon as captives for 50 long years. Thus, Israel harbors long-standing enmity against Nineveh. Now, the iniquities of Nineveh are overflowing and the Lord wants to settle the score through retributive justice.

Jonah does not cooperate with the Lord, may be on account of his reminiscence. The Lord obliquely induces Jonah to cooperate by causing the tempest in the sea, making the sailors hurl him into the sea, calming the sea after having him hurled, readying the fish to swallow him, and, lastly, guiding the fish to spew him out upon the shore. All these miraculous interventions of the Lord manifest the Lord's extraordinary mercy for the Ninevites covertly though. The Lord wants to remise them an opportunity to be mindful of their trespasses and the consequences thereof. Had the Lord no concern for the Ninevites, the moment Jonah fled from the Lord, the Lord would have obliterated Nineveh. The Lord is ever in hurry to save, never to delete. When Jonah consents to be a messenger, the Lord sets the timeframe of forty days for the Ninevites to respond. Only in this episode (Jonah



3:1-10), the reader comes across an elaborate response of the people (verses 5-9). At the effective level, the Ninevites accept the message of the Lord in faith, enter into abstinence, and put on sackcloth. No section of the living organisms is exempted from this response. At the affective level, the Ninevites devote themselves to ardent prayer, *metanoia*, and transformation of heart. Sublimely, the response subsumes their confidence in the Lord of sparing them, "Who knows? God may relent and change his mind. He may turn from his fierce anger, so that we do not perish" (verse 9). Such responses of the Ninevites stir the merciful heart of the Lord. According to verse 10, the Lord had made up the Lord's mind to erase the Ninevites, but their response to the Lord's summons of repentance impels the Lord to alter the Lord's plan to the diametrically opposite.<sup>11</sup> The Lord is able to about-face, because the essence of the being of the Lord is as Jonah confesses, "... you are a gracious God and merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love, and ready to relent from punishing" (Jonah 4:2b). The Lord's extraordinary mercy forgives and saves one ethnic race other than Israel.

## Conclusion

The family of Israel had no way to shatter the shackles of slavery, because Egyptian Empire wielded nonpareil power. Extraordinary

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<sup>11</sup> Stuart explicates that the Lord chooses to make the Lord's actions contingent upon human actions is no limitation of the Lord's sovereignty. Having first decided to place the option of obedience and disobedience before the human beings, the Lord's holding them responsible for their actions automatically involves a sort of contingency. But this hardly makes God dependent on the human beings; it rather makes them dependent on the Lord. The Lord holds all the right, all the power, and all the authority. The Lord does not exercise the Lord's power arbitrarily and discriminatorily. Jonah, the nationalist, wants the Lord to bless Israel and harm all its enemies. The Lord manifests the Lord's sovereignty not in stubbornness but in grace; not in narrow parochialism but in a willingness to forgive any people. See Douglas Stuart, *Hosea – Jonah*, Word Biblical Commentary, edited by David A. Hubbard, Glenn W. Barker, John D. W. Watts, and Ralph P. Martin, number 31 (Waco, Texas: Word Books, Publisher, 1987), 496.

oppression can be offset only by extraordinary mercy. The Lord on the Lord's own initiative begins the process of the family's liberation and, when the Reed Sea blocks the process, the Lord exhibits the Lord's might. The steadfast love for this family impels the Lord to accomplish that feat. The family becomes a free nation. The Lord makes a covenant with that nation. Immediately after entering into the covenantal relationship, the nation indulges into gross error of idolatry. As per the dictates of the treaty, the nation deserves to be annihilated. However, the extraordinary mercy of the Lord lets the nation survive. Extraordinary sin after becoming a covenanted nation can be forgiven only by extraordinary mercy. King David is one individual of this nation, who has received the maximum from the Lord in every field. Instead of responding to the steadfast love of the Lord through his fidelity, he gives into his inclination and that, too, to such an extent that he deserves to die. Death can be transformed into life only through extraordinary mercy. King David is pardoned by the Lord and the promise made to him by the Lord of his dynasty's eternal reign remains intact. The non-Israelite race in the City of Nineveh would have been wiped away from the face of the earth as per the plan of the Lord. However, the extraordinary mercy of the Lord makes the Lord to about-face. Extraordinary mercy means mercy that is not logical, not rational, not measurable, not repayable, and not expected, yet gratuitously poured. The Lord cannot but outpours the Lord's extraordinary mercy on each one, irrespective of caste, creed, culture, color, country, or gender.

# Words, Actions, Person

## Jesus, the 'Gospel' of Father's Mercy

Naveen Rebello

The thesis of the author is "Jesus Christ is the face of the Father's mercy" which are the introductory words of *Misericordiae Vultus*. He substantiates the thesis through various texts in the New Testament and especially the Synoptics where Jesus reveals the mercy of God through his words and his deeds. After defining the word 'mercy' in the Gospels, he offers reflections on some of the texts that deal with 'mercy' which include mercy-sayings, mercy-parables and mercy-healings. Fr. Naveen Rebello SVD, holds a Licentiate in Scripture (S.S.L) from the Pontifical Biblical Institute, Rome. Presently, he is the member of the Department of Scripture at Jnana-Deepa Vidyapeeth (JDV), Pune.

"Jesus Christ is the face of the Father's mercy." These introductory words of *Misericordiae Vultus*, the Papal Bull of the Indiction of the Extraordinary Jubilee of Mercy turn our attention to the Gospels to discover how the mercy of God became "living and visible in Jesus of Nazareth, reaching its culmination in him" (MV 1). Various texts in the New Testament, especially the Synoptics vividly portray how Jesus reveals the mercy of God through his words (sayings, parables) and his deeds (healings, miracles). Centred on the theme of 'Mercy in the Gospels', this paper intends to explore first of all, the understanding of mercy in the Gospels, especially Synoptics and secondly, offer a brief reflection on some of the texts that deal with 'mercy' (mercy-texts) that include: a) Mercy-Sayings; b) Mercy-Parables; and c) Mercy-Healings.



## 1. Understanding the Biblical Concept of Mercy

In the Hebrew bible, the terms that are used for mercy are: *hesed* and *rahamim*. The Hebrew word *hesed* means unmerited loving kindness, faithfulness, goodness, graciousness and also divine mercy.<sup>1</sup> It is often associated with the covenant that God established with the people of Israel, his chosen people upon whom he bestows his blessings, if they are responsible to keep the covenantal obligations. However, the most important expression used in the Hebrew Bible for mercy is *rahamim* which also means a feeling of love, loving sensation. It comes from the root *rehem* which means 'womb', 'inner parts of the body', 'bowels', 'intestines'.<sup>2</sup> The bowels or the intestines are regarded as the seat of feelings or the inner person.<sup>3</sup> By referring to the womb, *rehem* is also connected with pregnancy and ultimately with birth, the life-giving act. Hence, the miracle of conception, growth and protection of the child in the womb and its birth is understood in terms of mercy. When it is applied to God, it can be understood that the God of the Hebrew Bible is the 'wombish' God. For example, Ex 34:6-7, otherwise known as the 'compassion formula' contains an appropriate description of the nature of God in the OT with *hesed* and *rahamim*: "The Lord, the Lord, a God merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness, keeping steadfast love for thousands, forgiving iniquity, transgression and sin (cf. Deut 5:10; 2 Chr 30:9; Neh 9:7; Pss 86:5, 15; 103:8-13; 145:8; Joel 2:13; Jon 4:2).

While the New Testament authors use the Greek words *eleos*, *spagchna* and *oiktirmos* to translate both *hesed* and *rahamim*. Of these three words, the noun *eleos* and the verb *eleew* are employed most frequently.<sup>4</sup> It is defined as "kindness or concern expressed for

<sup>1</sup> Cf. L. KOEHLER & W. BAUMGARTNER, *The Hebrew and Aramaic Lexicon of the Old Testament*, I (Leiden – Boston – Köln) 336-37 (Henceforth, HALOT).

<sup>2</sup> Cf. HALOT, II, 1216-19.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid, 1218.

<sup>4</sup> The noun *eleos* occurs 27 times in the NT (in the Gospels – Mt 3x; Mk 0x; Lk 6x; Jn 0x). The verb *eleew* or *eleao* is used 28 times in the NT (in the Gospels – Mt 8x; Mk 3x; Lk 4x; Jn 0x).

someone in need, mercy, compassion, pity, clemency."<sup>5</sup> The adjective *eleēmōnes*, meaning merciful occurs only twice in the NT (cf. Mt 5:7; Heb 2:17).<sup>6</sup>

Likewise, the Greek noun *splagchna*, which occurs only in Lk 1:78, comes closer in meaning to the Hebrew *rahamim*. It literally means the human intestines, viscera, the entrails, bowels, guts, one's inmost self or feeling, heart, affection, love or mercy. In the NT, the bowels or the intestines or guts express the mercy that comes from the heart.<sup>7</sup> So, paying attention to the world of human feelings that flow from one's heart, the evangelists have employed the verb *splagchnizomai* (be moved with compassion, mercy, pity or have compassion or mercy) to indicate Jesus' profound and innermost feeling on several occasions: when he sees helpless people (Mt 9:36; Mk 6:34); the hungry multitude (Mt 14:14; 15:32; Mk 8:2), the crying blind men (Mt 20:34); the leper (Mk 1:41); the boy tormented by a dumb spirit (Mk 9:22); the widow, who lost her only son (Lk 7:13). In all these instances, Jesus is moved with compassion that results in either feeding the crowds or healing the sick or showing kindness to them.<sup>8</sup>

Finally, the Greek term *oiktirmos* means mercy, pity, kindness and compassion. We find *oiktirmos* used along with *splagchna* in Col 3:12; Phil 2:1; as adjectives in Lk 6:36 (2x) and Jam 5:11.<sup>9</sup> The Lucan text "Be merciful, even as your Father is merciful" (Lk 6:36), which

<sup>5</sup> W. BAUER – F. W. DANKER – W. F. ARNDT – F. W. GINGRICH, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature* (Chicago – London 2000) 316.

<sup>6</sup> Merciful (*eleemon*) occurs thirty times in the LXX. Out of which, twenty five times it is used to describe God and four times it refers to human beings (cf. Prov 11:17; 19:11; 20:6; 28:22). The usage in Ps 112:4 remains uncertain.

<sup>7</sup> Cf. CARDINAL W. KASPER, *Mercy. The Essence of the Gospel and the Key to Christian Life* (Mumbai 2015) 70 (Originally Published by Paulist Press, Mahwah, New Jersey 2014).

<sup>8</sup> The noun *splagchnon* is employed 11 times in the NT (in the Gospels, only in Lk 1x and Acts 1x). The verb *splagchnizomai* is used 12 times in the NT (in the Gospels – Mt 5x; Mk 4x; Lk 3x; Jn 0x).

<sup>9</sup> The noun *oiktirmos* is used 5 times in the NT (all occurrences are in the Letters). The verb *oiktiro* occurs only twice in the NT, both in Rom 9:15.

serves as the foundational text for the theme of the Jubilee year uses the adjective *oiktirmon* twice.

Robert Guelich, an NT scholar understands the biblical concept of 'mercy' in two ways: *pardon* and *kindness*: a) firstly, the pardon accorded to the one who has done wrong (cf. Ex 34:6-7; Isa 55:7; Mt 18:32-34) and b) secondly, showing kindness to the one in need (cf. Ps 86:15-16; Isa 30:18; Mk 10:47).<sup>10</sup> Guelich's description is certainly appropriate and evident in the light of God's revelation to Moses in Ex 34:6-7 that portrays the compassionate nature of God. Similarly, an echo of this portrayal is found in Jonah, who describes God's mercy, while complaining, "for I knew that you are a gracious God and merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love, and ready to relent from punishing" (Jon 4:2). These texts clearly illustrate that mercy as an act of pardon and forgiveness, extended to both Israelites and non-Israelites alike is applied exclusively to God.

## 2. Mercy in the Teachings of Jesus

In his teachings, Jesus exhorted his disciples to be merciful. On several occasions, the disciples witnessed how their master showed God's tender mercy to people, especially to sinners who approached him with a repentant heart. Being recipients of his teachings and witnesses to his healings, the disciples were invited as well as challenged to show unconditional mercy to others, imitating their master. Reflecting on Jesus, who showed the example of mercy to his disciples, the Holy Father observes, "Jesus of Nazareth, by his words, his actions, and his entire person reveals the mercy of God" (MV 1). Here, Pope Francis focuses on three important aspects of Jesus' ministry and life in the Gospels, by which he reveals his Father's mercy: a) words; b) actions; and c) his own life. In other words, Jesus' whole life becomes an embodiment of divine mercy.

### a) By His Words – 'Mercy' Sayings

There are several mercy-sayings in the gospels. To cite a few, "Blessed are the merciful, for they will be shown mercy" (Mt 5:7)

<sup>10</sup>Cf. R. GUELICH, *The Sermon on the Mount. A Foundation for Understanding* (Waco, TX: Word, 1982)88.



from the Sermon on the Mount: "Be merciful, just as your Father is merciful" (Lk 6:36) from the Sermon on the Plain: "I desire mercy, not sacrifice" (Hos 6:6 quoted in Mt 9:13; 12:7) etc. Let us consider one mercy-saying of Jesus, to understand the profound depth of his teaching on mercy.

**• Beatitude of Mercy – *Blessed are the merciful, for they will be shown mercy (Mt 5:7)***

One of the concrete texts of mercy, in which Jesus promises a blessing to those who are merciful is found in the Sermon on the Mount in Mt 5:7, otherwise known as the 'Beatitude of Mercy' - "Blessed are the merciful, for they will be shown mercy." As widely accepted in the NT scholarship, the Sermon on the Mount is the first and the largest discourse among the discourses of Jesus in Mt's gospel (5:1-7:29). It can be considered 'the manual of discipleship' that defines what it means to be a committed and faithful disciple of Jesus. In this Sermon, we find Jesus' authoritative teaching concerning the disciples' identity and their lifestyle; and also their relationship with God, with Jesus and with others.<sup>11</sup> The beatitudes (vv.3-12) that inaugurate Mt 5 serve as an 'introduction' to the Sermon, to an extent that they function as a 'door' to enter into the profound depths of the Sermon. They are not practical tips for a successful Christian life, rather expressions of blessings, unfolding the advent of God's kingdom to those who are doing God's will and are practicing Jesus' message in their lives. In other words, the beatitudes encapsulate the 'essence' of Jesus' proclamation of God's Kingdom.

From the structural point of view, the beatitudes in Matthew (vv.3-10) follow a tripartite structure: firstly, there is a *proclamation* of being 'blessed' (result); secondly, the *characterization* of those people, who are proclaimed blessed (cause); and finally, the description of the *promise of the eschatological blessing* (announcement of the reward).

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<sup>11</sup> For an excellent discussion on the theme of 'discipleship' in Matthew's Sermon on the Mount see H. PATTARUMADATHIL, *Your Father in Heaven. Discipleship in Matthew as a Process of Becoming Children of God* (AnBib 172; Rome 2008).

With these initial observations, let us consider the fifth beatitude in v.7: "Blessed are the merciful, for they shall be shown mercy."

### 1) Blessed – Proclamation of a Beatitude

The Greek adjective *makarios*<sup>12</sup> (happy, blessed) declares certain people to be privileged and fortunate, describing a state of happiness. In classical Greek, this adjective *makarios* (Latin, *beatus*) was basically used for the gods showing the supreme happiness of their life, which is free from every limitation including toil and death.<sup>13</sup> In addition, it was also used for the deceased heroes, who were in a happy state similar to that of gods. However, its equivalent word in Hebrew *ʾašrê* which comes from the noun 'happiness', refers to a person supremely happy, fortunate and blessed. In the Hebrew texts, the understanding of one's well-being or one's happiness consists in the blessing of life (Prov 8:34-35); security (Ps 40:4); deliverance (Ps 2:11); military success (Deut 33:29); prosperity (Ps 1:1-3); posterity (Ps 127:5) or help, justice or abundance of food (Ps 146:5-7); an eschatological hope (in rare cases, cf. Isa 30:18; 32:20; Dan 12:12) etc.<sup>14</sup> Further, in the Wisdom Literature, *ʾašrê* underlines the happiness of the person resulting from a wise and prudent life. In the NT, we can identify about forty-four such beatitudes, though they lack uniformity in form and content.<sup>15</sup> Coming back to the beatitudes in Mt 5:3-12, to be 'blessed' is a state of happiness, because a person is favored by God and his kingdom. This can be understood in the light of Lk 1:48, where Mary expresses such a state of bliss in her *Magnificat*, "for he has looked with favor on the lowliness of his servant. Surely from now on all generations will call me *blessed*." In short, to be proclaimed 'blessed' is a special privilege of being favored by God.

### 2) Merciful – the Cause for being 'Blessed'

In v.7, the beatitude is addressed to the 'merciful'. Importantly, it is neither a *command* nor an *exhortation*, but a declaration. Mt uses the

<sup>12</sup> The word *makarios* occurs 50 times in the NT, in which 6 of them are not beatitudes (eg. Acts 20:35; 26:2).

<sup>13</sup> Cf. GÜELICH, *The Sermon on the Mount*, 63.

<sup>14</sup> For more examples see, GÜELICH, *The Sermon on the Mount*, 63.

<sup>15</sup> Mt 13x; Mk 0x; Lk 15x; Jn 2x; Rev 7x; rest 7x. Total = 44.

Greek term *eleemones* for the 'merciful' (cf. Heb 2:17),<sup>16</sup> to refer those who practice or exhibit the divine quality of mercy (*eleos*). However, Mt does not elaborate on what it is to be merciful in v.7. But stated pointedly from the overall context of his Gospel, to be 'merciful' is to be kind to the one who is in dire need. This is clearly demonstrated even by Luke in the parable of the Good Samaritan (cf. Lk 10:37). To illustrate this, let us consider three texts that shed light on the 'merciful' in Mt's gospel.

a. In his gospel, Mt who has a penchant for quoting the OT, while emphasizing the God's tender mercy quotes Hosea 6:6, "I desire mercy, not sacrifice" on two occasions in 9:13 and 12:7. The first is in the context of Jesus' table fellowship with the tax collectors and sinners, after the call of the tax collector Matthew to be his disciple. Jesus' action of reclining with the sinners, according to the Jewish rule of conduct (*Halakhah*) amounted to a grave scandal in terms of ritual defilement. When the Pharisees questioned the disciples about their master's unlawful behavior, his prompt response to them by quoting Hosea reflected his merciful nature, "those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick. Go and learn what this means, I desire mercy, not sacrifice." In this way, Jesus relativizes the law by upholding the tender mercy of God in relation to the sinners, who are not to be condemned as those who cause ritual defilement. His table fellowship, in this sense, can truly be called "banquet of mercy", at which God prefers the company of the sinners, who stand in need of divine mercy rather than remaining undefiled as a prerequisite for offering sacrifices in the Temple. Consequently, Jesus' *Gospel of Father's mercy* and his acts of mercy arouse stern opposition from his adversaries that ultimately lead him to the cross.

b. In the second text in 12:7, Mt quotes Hos 6:6 in Jesus' defense of his disciples against the allegations of the hostile Pharisees concerning

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<sup>16</sup> In Heb 2:17, Jesus is presented as the High Priest, "Therefore he had to be made like his brethren in every respect, so that he might become a merciful and faithful high priest in the service of God, to make expiation for the sins of the people." There are two qualities that characterize Jesus in this text: 'merciful' (*eleemon*) and 'faithful'.



Sabbath laws. They complain that his disciples are plucking grains and eating them on the Sabbath (Mt 12:1-12). Without judging the actions of his disciples on the basis of prevalent laws and condemning them, he confronts his opponents with a stand against the legalism that what God desires is mercy that empathizes with human misery and not conformism that condemns the sinners and discards the guilty. In this way, showing kindness to his hungry disciples, Jesus affirms that mercy of God takes precedence over human-made rules, norms, laws and regulations.

c. Finally, in Mt 23:23, Jesus lashes out at the scribes and the Pharisees for ignoring justice, mercy and faith, the three weightier matters of the law and for focusing on the externals and the insignificant matters like tithes. In neglecting justice, mercy and faith, they have failed in their responsibility towards their fellow human beings and in the process, they have lost sight of the larger picture. For their failure to practice these three weightier matters, Jesus resolutely condemns the inconsistency between their faith and their action.

So, in the light of the above textual references, we can observe that being 'merciful' is a divine quality or a weightier matter that is manifested in offering pardon and forgiveness to the sinners by foregoing judgment and reaching out with kindness to those in need. Those who exhibit this divine quality have already experienced the tender mercy of God in their life in some way or the other. And since they value God's mercy, they seek to communicate their experience of mercy to others by their words and deeds. In a basic sense, then, "the merciful (5:7) are healers, people who seek to put right what has gone wrong. They favor the removal of everything that prevents life from being as God intends: poverty, ostracism, hunger, disease, demons, debt."<sup>17</sup> As a result, their reward awaits them.

### **3) They Will Be Shown Mercy – the Future Reward**

The eschatological reward promised in the beatitude concerning receiving mercy in the future is the work of God. The Greek text

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<sup>17</sup> M. A. POWELL, "Matthew's Beatitudes: Reversals and Rewards of the Kingdom", *CBQ* 58 (1996) 471.

illustrates this with a 'divine passive' (*eleethesontai*) here. The promise clearly indicates the type of treatment the merciful will receive at the Last Judgment (Mt 25:31-46). On that day everyone will receive according to the measure one has given. "One does earn the reward; one simply receives in full what one has already freely experienced through Jesus Messiah, namely, the pardoning acceptance of God."<sup>18</sup> Thus, on the day of the Last Judgment, the God of mercy will not overlook even the little deeds that the merciful people have done - offering pardon and showing kindness.

To conclude, what does this 'beatitude of mercy' convey to the readers? Firstly, being 'merciful' is a *kingdom value*. Therefore, showing mercy that consists in forgiveness and kindness is not a sign of weakness, rather an act of courage and strength that springs from God's forgiving mercy. Secondly, the beatitude *praises* the merciful, who forgive unconditionally their brothers and sisters and show kindness to the needy. In the light of the Matthean texts, mercy does not consist in some deeds of charity, but accepting those who have done us wrong or those whom we find unworthy of our love. Finally, *God values mercy*. "The advent of God's kingdom is a blessing to those who value mercy, because God values mercy and when God rules, what God values will become reality."<sup>19</sup> What God values becomes a reality for those who have lived and practiced it as a value. It is a sign of God's blessing and the future in which God will judge the merciful will be a time of mercy and reward and not of condemnation and punishment. The merciful God will be by their side and the kingdom will be theirs.

### b) 'Mercy'-Parables

Jesus was a master storyteller. In fact, before all the stories could be told about him (gospels), there were stories that he told (parables). By narrating stories that embraced human life and depicted real life situations, "Jesus' parables consistently captured the listeners' attention and brought them face-to-face with some aspect of his message that would have been far less effectively communicated through non-

<sup>18</sup>GUELICH, *The Sermon on the Mount*, 89-90.

<sup>19</sup>POWELL, "Matthew's Beatitudes", 472.

pictorial language.”<sup>20</sup> Using such stories creatively, he challenged the lives of his listeners by compelling them to rethink about their relationship - with God and others. Most of his parables provoked his listeners rather than comforted, disturbed rather than consoled, causing to subvert the conventional wisdom, established traditions and myths. Undeniably, the power of Jesus' parables was in his thought-provoking images and analogies. Any attentive reader of the Gospels today discovers that the parables told by Jesus are so human and so realistic that they reflect the first century Palestinian life, especially Jewish household and family life - father and sons, brothers; stories about animal and natural world - sheep, leaven, coins, seeds, farms, vineyard, trees, houses, nets; stories about social life - masters and slaves, owners and tenants, rich and poor, banquets and wedding feasts; stories about trade and commerce, etc. Thus, by teaching so graphically through stories and sayings, Jesus mirrored real life in his parables and showed no interest in abstract concepts or notions.

### 1) Parables and God's Kingdom

Why did Jesus use parables in his teachings? It is to help people understand *who God is* and *what his reign or kingdom is like*. So, for example, his parables would begin with, “For this reason, the kingdom of heaven may be compared to...” (Mt 18:23). In narrating them, he used a ‘medium’ to communicate the ‘message’. Following a pattern already existed in the Hebrew Bible - the stories in the form of parables were the preferred form of speaking about life and humanity.<sup>21</sup> His stories appealed to the young and the old, poor and rich, learned and unlearned as well. Synoptics, in particular Luke's gospel has more parables than any other Gospel, in which about one-third of Jesus' teaching is in the form of parables. Like the rabbis of his time, who made use of parables as a special and extraordinary way of teaching, Jesus made use of images and characters taken from everyday life to bring alive and illustrate his message.

<sup>20</sup> H. MUGABE, “Parable of the Rich Fool: Luke 12:13-21”, *Review and Expositor* 111/1 (2014) 67.

<sup>21</sup> Cf. M. S. RINDGE, “Luke's Artistic Parables: Narratives of Subversion, Imagination, and Transformation”, *Review and Expositor* 68/4 (2014) 403.

However, what made Jesus' teaching so radically different from his contemporaries is the centrality of the message of God's kingdom. For him, they were stories conveying the core of the good news and values of God's universal reign. Among such parables, Jesus told 'parables of mercy' to reveal God's tender mercy to people, so that they can imitate the Father in showing mercy to their fellow human beings. Through such parables, he taught his listeners to be merciful, as the Holy Father observes, "In the parables devoted to mercy, Jesus reveals the nature of God as that of a Father who never gives up until he has forgiven the wrong and overcome rejection with compassion and mercy." (MV 9)

## 2) Parables of Mercy

What are some of the parables of mercy? We can point out a few of them that manifest diverse faces of mercy in the respective parables and after having identified the theme of mercy in each parable, we shall analyze one parable for further consideration.

a. In Mt 18:23-35, we have the parable of the unforgiving servant that highlights the reciprocity of mercy - "should you not have had mercy on your fellow slave, as I had mercy on you?" (v.33). Commenting on this parable, the Holy Father says, "Jesus affirms that mercy is not only an action of the Father, it becomes a criterion for ascertaining who his true children are. In short, we are called to show mercy because mercy has first been shown to us. Pardoning offences becomes the clearest expression of merciful love, and for us Christians it is an imperative from which we cannot excuse ourselves." (MV 9)

b. In Luke's gospel, the parable of the two debtors and their creditor (Lk 7:36-50) told in the house of Simon the Pharisee presents the meeting of divine mercy and human misery. The woman who is forgiven more loves more. It affirms that only God's mercy and forgiveness can make up for the debt that each one owes to God.

c. The parable of the Good Samaritan (Lk 10:25-37) demonstrates that the *love for God* cannot be separated from *love for neighbor*. The neighbor is defined by mercy and compassion ("the one who showed mercy on him" - v. 37), which is not merely a feeling of 'sympathy', but an action of 'caring' for the one who is in need, thus



going beyond all religious, social, cultural and ethnic origins and membership.

d. The parables of the Lost Sheep, the Lost Coin and the Lost Son or the Merciful Father (Lk 15:1-32) can rightfully be called the “gospel of mercy”. In the first two parables, mercy becomes a search for something that is lost, which culminates in rejoicing. Accentuating this ‘rejoicing’ the Holy Father writes, “In these parables, God is always presented as full of joy, especially when he pardons. In them we find the core of the Gospel and of our faith, because mercy is presented as a force that overcomes everything, filling the heart with love and bringing consolation through pardon” (*MV* 9). In the third parable, the merciful love of the father overcomes the waywardness of his son, by restoring anew his dignity as a son. It teaches us that “God’s mercy does not humiliate the person.”<sup>22</sup>

e. The parable of the Rich Man and the beggar Lazarus (Lk 16:19-31) reveals that he who shows no mercy to others when he is still alive, finds no mercy from God in afterlife.

f. The parable of the Pharisee and the Publican in the Temple (Lk 18:9-14) demonstrates that the Pharisee does not go home justified as his piety, religiosity and good works lead him to judge others, while the Publican, who does not judge anyone but prays, “God, be merciful to me, a sinner!” (v. 13), goes home justified.

Thus, the above parables illustrate that mercy has different faces - forgiveness and pardon, care and compassion, finding the lost one and rejoicing, etc. In addition, if we pay attention to their narrative plot, a striking feature of these parables is the ‘reversal’ of the situation. “All of this is upside down, like an inverted pyramid! The parables of mercy catch the hearers off guard because God’s action in them reverses every kind of firm certainty people have and forces them to reconsider their way of thinking about God and of envisioning Jesus.”<sup>23</sup> In other

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<sup>22</sup> KASPER, *Mercy*, 105.

<sup>23</sup> PONTIFICAL COUNCIL FOR THE PROMOTION OF THE NEW EVANGELIZATION, *The Parables of Mercy* (Huntington, IN: 2015) 13.

words, God's mercy reverses the situation, resolving the initial tensions with surprising conclusions, contrary to what the listener would expect. They demonstrate that God's action, moved with mercy is capable of overcoming every human wrongdoing. As a result, they turn the world of Jesus' listeners upside down, challenging their conclusions, contrary to the normal logic. Do they not challenge our conclusions too?

Let us now consider one of the parables of mercy.

• **Reciprocity of Mercy: Parable of the Unforgiving Servant or the Merciful King? (Mt 18:23-35 )**

Synoptic Gospels contain many parables, which are clear expressions of God's tender mercy that invite the listeners/readers to move from being 'hard-hearted' to being 'merciful'. One such example is Mt 18:23-35 that focuses on how one must show mercy to one's fellow human being. In this parable, 'mercy' and 'forgiveness' are considered almost synonymously. Though the original story ends by v.34, the Matthean additional interpretation in v.35 transforms this parable into a story on 'forgiveness'. In the context, the parable is preceded by Peter's famous question about the limits of forgiveness (Mt 18:21-22). Applying the message of God's boundless mercy that offers forgiveness without measure and conditions, and God's uncompromising stance towards those who reject mercy and forgiveness, the evangelist has magnificently re-told the story on the 'reciprocity of mercy' and placed it in the ecclesial context (Community Discourse 18:1-35) to focus on the need for forgiveness in the community.

Structurally, after the introductory *setting* of the Parable (v.23), we find the first encounter between the king and his servant (vv.24-27); the servant and his fellow servant(s) (vv.28-31); the last encounter between the king and the servant (vv.32-34); and the conclusion (v.35) - a message to be drawn from the story, in order to live and practice 'forgiveness' in the ecclesial context. Though the story is commonly titled as 'the parable of the unforgiving servant', the change of the title as 'the parable of the merciful king' can enable us appreciate its narrative beauty that the parable deserves to be seen from the eyes of 'mercy'. Let us focus on some of its significant elements!

## 1) Enormity of the Debt!

In the parable, the first servant owed ten thousand talents to the king. In Jesus' time, one talent was the equivalent of ten thousand denarii or in other words, it was worth more than fifteen years' wages of a laborer. Certainly, it was a very high measure of money.<sup>24</sup> Unfortunately, the parable does not tell us, why the servant borrowed such an enormous amount from the king. In contrast, the second servant owed the first servant only a hundred denarii. A denarius was the usual day's wage for a laborer.<sup>25</sup> Therefore, a hundred denarii would represent about four months' worth of work in comparison to the never-ending work owed by the first servant to the king. Needless to say, the parable clearly indicates the disproportionate nature of the servants' debts. In simple terms, the second servant could be freed of his debt, if he showed patience and four months of hard work for repayment, while the first servant could never repay his debt, even if he were to work his entire lifetime. In fact, no extension or prolongation would be sufficient enough to repay such an immense debt. Nevertheless, the incalculable, the immeasurable and the enormous debt of the first servant, remitted by the king sets the tone for understanding the incalculable mercy that the king treats his servant with! "The aim is to awaken the idea of the immeasurable vastness of God's forgiveness especially when compared to the limited and somewhat petty human reality."<sup>26</sup>

## 2) Mercy Wasted!

The terms 'pity', 'patience', 'mercy' and 'forgiveness' qualify the actions and the attitude of the merciful king. When the first servant fell on his knees and pleaded for patience, the king showed pity on him and had him released and the debt forgiven. Since the repayment was impossible, the mercy that the king showed could alone cancel his

<sup>24</sup> Cf. D.J. HARRINGTON, *The Gospel of Matthew* (Sacra Pagina I; Collegeville 1991) 270.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid.

<sup>26</sup> PONTIFICAL COUNCIL FOR THE PROMOTION OF THE NEW EVANGELIZATION, *Confession: The Sacrament of Mercy* (Huntington, IN: 2015) 39.

debt. Moreover, it gave a new lease of life not only to him, but also to his wife and children, whom the king had ordered to be sold together with the servant and all his possessions (v.25). In contrast, the terms 'seizing him by the throat', 'began to choke him', 'refused', and 'threw him into prison' characterize the actions and attitude of the unforgiving servant towards his fellow servant. His behaviour therefore, is shown in sharp contrast with the behaviour of the king. He, who experienced his lord's mercy failed to extend it to others. So, the axis of assessment was not merely vertical - between a king and a servant, but it was also horizontal, concerning one's relationship with fellow human beings. Hence, the servant did not have to run around looking for someone to show mercy, but the opportunity came knocking at his door! And he turned out to be a wicked servant! Had he been more sensitive and attentive to the cry of his fellow servant, the mercy he received from his lord would not have gone wasted!

### 3) Reciprocity of Mercy

The timeless wisdom is certainly true, *what one freely receives, he must freely give*. (cf. Mt 10:8b). The only words of the king in the entire parable, addressed to admonish his wicked servant underline the focus of the parable, i.e., the reciprocity of mercy. He said, "You wicked servant! I forgave you all that debt because you pleaded with me. And should you not have had mercy on your fellow servant, as I had mercy on you?" (vv.32-33). The servant was forgiven an impossible debt by the merciful king. He, who was forgiven more, should have been more forgiving and merciful! As a result, the stern words were followed by the rigorous actions by the king, "And in anger his lord delivered him to the jailers until he should pay his entire debt" (v.34). The wicked servant learnt nothing from the merciful behavior of the king. Perhaps, he had to learn the hard way!

The Matthean addition of the final verse accentuates the 'forgiveness' dimension of the story. "So also my heavenly Father will do to every one of you, if you do not forgive your brother from your heart" (v.35). The evangelist intends to underscore that God is willing to show mercy and forgiveness to the sinners and to the wrongdoers, provided they must also be prepared to show mercy to others. In this



way, the parable unravels the Jewish understanding of divine mercy and divine justice during Jesus' time as emphasized in rabbinic Judaism - "If you want mercy from God, be merciful to others. If you exact justice from others, expect the same from God."<sup>27</sup> Therefore, what is expected of the listeners or readers of this parable is to recognize that the relationship between fellow human beings is the sole criterion for ascertaining the relationship between God and them. Hence, reciprocity of mercy is both an invitation and a challenge.

To conclude, what is the message of this parable of mercy to the readers of our time?

Firstly, *God has no limits for showing mercy*. Not even an enormous debt can withhold his mercy. So, if God places no limits, why would the humans place a limit on forgiving and showing mercy to others? Consequently, those who place limits on forgiving others and refuse mercy will have limits placed on their forgiveness by God. So, there will be divine justice in this regard. Secondly, *be reciprocal!* Give what you have received and give it freely! However, in human situations, the hardest thing is to give without expecting anything in return. So, if one wishes to receive mercy from God, he/she has to be merciful to others and if wishes to exact justice from others, he/she can also expect the same from God. Finally, the parable highlights that *a merciful person is a forgiving person*. Here, mercy as the forgiveness of an impossible debt incurred by humans is at the core of the story. "Unlimited and unconditional forgiveness determines fraternal relations, activating a service inspired by and performed in mercy."<sup>28</sup> Seen from this perspective, boundless mercy generates forgiveness, neither to be withheld, nor to be measured and to be reserved, but to be shared and to be given freely!

### **b) By His Actions – 'Mercy' Healings**

Jesus not only reveals God's mercy by his teachings, but also by his concrete actions, especially by his healings and various miracles. In

<sup>27</sup> HARRINGTON, *The Gospel of Matthew*, 272.

<sup>28</sup> *Confession: The Sacrament of Mercy*, 41-42.

other words, all he said and all he did illustrated his Father's tender mercy. Every act of Jesus in the Gospels, filled with compassion and moved by pity was directed to the sinners and to the needy and thus became an expression of Father's tender mercy. He not only restored the sick people to physical wholeness, but also restored them to the filial relationship with the Father. "To show mercy" in Mt's gospel on several occasions is to heal the sick (9:27; 20:30-31) or to free the people who are possessed by the demons (15:22). These "acts of mercy may represent instances in which the rule of God comes upon people, and the house of Satan is plundered (Mt 12:28-29)."<sup>29</sup>

Let us consider one of the mercy-healings that Jesus performed, especially to a non-Jew, a Canaanite woman, by crossing the boundaries.

### • **Mercy Transcends Boundaries:**

#### **Jesus and the Canaanite Woman (Mt 15:21-28)**

The healing of the daughter of the Canaanite woman is a fascinating narrative where the divine mercy and the persevering faith cross paths only to converge at the end, resulting in a healing. The puzzling account of the Canaanite woman's faith occurs in the narrative block of 13:54-17:27 that deals with "faith in Jesus". The message of the Kingdom, proclaimed in the Parable Discourse (13:1-53) is subsequently met with threefold human response: rejection, misunderstanding and faith (wavering faith, little faith, and deep faith).

Prior to the exchange between Jesus and this Gentile woman, there are episodes of the wavering faith of Peter in 14:28-31, rejection of Jesus by the Pharisees and the scribes (15:1-9) and misunderstanding by the Pharisees concerning the purity laws that separate clean from unclean and Jew from Gentile (15:10-20). Further, this episode is followed by rejection of Jesus (16:1-4) and misunderstanding by the disciples (16:5-12). So, in the midst of this narrative tension, Mt presents the Canaanite woman as a model for faith, who seeks mercy and help on behalf of her severely demon possessed daughter.

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<sup>29</sup> POWELL, "Matthew's Beatitudes", 471.

The Canaanite woman lives at the 'boundaries'. In fact, the entire episode is punctuated by 'boundaries' – geographical, ethnic, racial, cultural, gender, social and religious, which heighten the intensity of the exchange between the two primary characters – Jesus and the Canaanite woman.

### 1) Geographical and Ethnic Boundaries

The narrative begins with the *spatial* setting that contains the detail of Jesus' withdrawal to the region of Tyre and Sidon, the two Gentile cities on the Mediterranean coast. Earlier in the Gospel, these two Phoenician cities were presented in contrast to Chorazin and Bethsaida in the woes of the unrepentant cities (11:21-22). Even in the OT, both these cities shared the infamous reputation (cf. Isa 23:1-18, Ezek 26-28; Joel 3:4-8) for their arrogance of wealth and power. Secondly, the specific reference to the *ethnicity* of the woman as a 'Canaanite' (unlike Mark who identifies her as a *Syrophonician* by birth in 7:24-30)<sup>30</sup>, recalls the OT image of the Canaanites as the traditional enemy of Israel. This precise reference to the woman as 'Canaanite', the ancient designation of the pagan inhabitants of that area, sets the tone for an encounter between a Jew and a Gentile and also a later theological concern of the Matthean community, regarding their relationship in God's plan of salvation.<sup>31</sup> The word 'Canaanite' is used only here in Mt (never in other gospels), who perhaps intentionally chose this term to draw readers' attention to the 'otherness' of the woman that

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<sup>30</sup> For a detailed discussion on various possible reasons for which Mt changed Mk's Greek *Syrophonician* to *Canaanite*, see W. D. DAVIES – D. C. ALLISON, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Gospel according to Saint Matthew*. II. *Matthew 8-18* (ICC; Edinburgh 1991) 548.

<sup>31</sup> Regarding the function of this episode in Mt's Gospel, Harrington observes: "Relations between Jews and Gentiles were a very sensitive topic for the Matthean community. Though the majority of the community seems to have been Jewish by birth, some were Gentiles by birth. The conversation between Jesus and the Canaanite woman in Matt 15:21-28 would have functioned as a model or at least a causal explanation why Jews and Gentiles could exist together in the same Christian community." HARRINGTON, *The Gospel of Matthew*, 237-38.

distinguished her from the rest of the characters in the story.<sup>32</sup> We might ask - who actually crossed the boundaries? Jesus or the Canaanite woman? Did Jesus really go to (go towards?) the gentile cities or did the woman cross over to the Jewish soil? The Greek text poses some ambiguous details.<sup>33</sup> However, the inconsistent geographical details matter less considering the entire narrative, since the focus shifts to the encounter between Jesus and the Canaanite woman.

## 2) Gender Boundaries

Presented as 'woman' in addition to being 'gentile', the role of the Canaanite woman appears to be further marginalized.<sup>34</sup> "Send her away, for she is crying after us" (v.23) - the reaction of the disciples to the plea of the woman can either be sensitive or indifferent. Taken in a positive sense, the suggestion of the disciples can be interpreted as "do something for her and send her away" or negatively, "get rid of her, for she keeps shouting after us". Previously, in Mt 14:15 the disciples had asked Jesus to 'send away' the crowd to buy food before it got too late. But Jesus resisted their request and in contrast, fed the crowds with the loaves and the fish. In the intervention of the disciples, either one of indifference or of suggestion to help the woman, the distinction of 'we' and 'she'; 'us' and 'her' is clearly evident in their address. She being a 'woman' and a 'gentile' is obviously an 'outsider' to the group, whose presence has to be got rid of at the earliest.

## 3) Theological Boundaries

Following Jesus' enigmatic silence and disciples' reaction, the exclusivist reply of Jesus to the woman raises eyebrows. "I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel" (v.24) is certainly a theological justification for Jesus' mission exclusively for the Jewish people. Previously, a similar saying in Mt 10:5-6 was part of the

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<sup>32</sup> Cf. M. S. Baffes, "Jesus and the Canaanite Woman: A Story of Reversal", *Journal of Theta Alpha Kappa* 35/2 (2011) 16-17.

<sup>33</sup> The problem lies in translating two Greek prepositions: a) *eis* in Mt 15:21 as 'to', or 'toward', or 'in the direction of' or 'into'; and b) *apo* in Mt 15:22 as 'from those regions' or 'away from those regions'.

<sup>34</sup> Cf. M. Baffes, "Jesus and the Canaanite Woman", 17.



instruction to the disciples for the mission, "Go nowhere among the Gentiles... but go rather to the lost sheep of Israel." In the light of Ezek 34:16, the restoration of the 'lost sheep' was an important mission of the Messiah - to seek the lost, to bring back the strayed, to bind up the crippled and to strengthen the weak. Further, from Mt's theological perspective, before offering salvation to the Gentiles, God in Christ offered salvation to Israel. As a result, Jesus' mission is presented as a fulfillment of the OT promises. Nevertheless, Jesus' reply certainly leaves an open-ended tension between 'particularism' and 'universalism' (Jewish Mission and Gentile Mission).<sup>35</sup>

#### 4) Social and Religious Boundaries

The repeated requests of the Canaanite woman for 'mercy' and 'help' apparently receive a harsh response from Jesus - "it is not good to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs" (v.26). Understood allegorically, the 'children' refers to the Jews and 'dogs' to the Gentiles. In fact, this statement has led to much debate and discussion among the scholars as to why did Jesus use such a derogatory or crude analogy to refer to a group of people?<sup>36</sup> Most likely, it is a household imagery, where children receive food from their parents and dogs from their masters. The point of the argument is that both do not receive the same food. However, in no way, it was meant to compare the two

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<sup>35</sup> For a discussion on Jewish – Gentile relations in Mt's Gospel see, D. SENIOR, "Between Two Worlds: Gentile and Jewish Christians in Matthew's Gospel", *CBQ* 61 (1999) 14-16; B. BYRNE, "The Messiah in whose Name 'the Gentiles will Hope' (Matt 12,21): Gentile Inclusion as an Essential Element of Matthew's Christology", in *ABR* 50 (2002) 58-68; and A. J. SALDARINI, *Matthew's Christian-Jewish Community* (Chicago 1994) 68-83.

<sup>36</sup> In order to justify Jesus' position and to explain the various nuances of the verse, biographical, geographical, cultural, paradigmatic, linguistic, salvation-historical reasons are offered. However, none is found satisfactory to date. For a summary of various positions, see G. THEISSEN, *The Gospels in Context. Social and Political History in the Synoptic Tradition* (London – New York 1991) 61-62; G. S. JACKSON, 'Have Mercy on Me'. The Story of the Canaanite Woman in Matthew 15,21-28 (*JSNT.S* 228, Sheffield 2002) 52-55.

subjects - children and dogs as two *opposing entities* at an *ontological* level. If this household imagery were to be taken out of the domestic context and applied to the existing social tensions between Jews and Gentiles, we might miss the point as well. No one could deny the prevalent social enmity between Jews and Gentiles. However, the purpose of the analogy was not meant to highlight the sensitive relations between these two groups, but to accentuate the 'blessing' and the 'privilege' that the Jewish people as God's chosen nation received. So, one can find the implied 'exclusivist' concept of mission and salvation here. In spite of being rejected, in response, the woman shows her firm faith by using the same analogy affirming that she can still be a recipient of God's blessings, even though she belongs to the 'other' group. Thus, she firmly reiterates that the social and the religious 'other' can still find entry into the kingdom of heaven and become recipients of divine blessings, if they persist in faith.

### 5) Transcending All Boundaries

"Have mercy on me, Lord, Son of David" (v.22(; "Lord, help me" (v.25); "Yes, Lord, yet even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their masters' table" (v.27). Notwithstanding continuous rejections, the woman perseveres in pleading for mercy. Importantly, three times she continues to address him as "Lord" acknowledging his messiahship. "Have mercy on me" - to the Lord of mercy, the woman pleads for mercy. Here, Mt uses the word *eleew* for mercy. On five occasions in Mt's gospel, Jesus appears as the subject of this verb of mercy (9:27; 15:22; 17:15; 20:30-31). And all the five occurrences are in the context of healing - either the sick persons or their relatives approach Jesus with an appeal to show mercy. In turn, Jesus accepts their request and heals them. In fact, all the healing miracles of Jesus, from this perspective, can be seen as divine acts of mercy. As seen before, one of the ways that the biblical concept of mercy is understood is in terms of kindness, shown to the person who is in dire need. This is clearly reflected in the cry of this gentile mother, who pleads Jesus to have kindness shown to her and to her daughter. And the mercy that she pleaded is at last shown to her, with an appreciation for her enduring faith, "O woman, great is your faith! Be it done for you as you desire"

(v.28). As the narrative ends, virtually all the boundaries are transcended. Ultimately, faith triumphs over traditions and beliefs, and mercy prevails!

To conclude, what does this 'act of mercy' convey to us? Firstly, *God shows mercy and kindness to those who are in need*. His mercy works beyond boundaries. All boundaries are human constructions, defined and set up by human thinking and legitimized by human institutions that have the potential to enslave the 'other'. However, they cannot limit God and his mercy. Secondly, a marginalized person, who lives at the boundaries, is presented as a *model for faith* in order to emphasize that God's mercy reaches even to the periphery. Thirdly, *God's reign is for everyone* – Jews and Gentiles, men and women, pure and impure, insiders and outsiders. No one is excluded from the blessings that the Reign of God brings, even those who live at the periphery. Hence, it is an invitation to examine one's attitudes, traditions and beliefs that tend to marginalize people on the basis of race, gender, ethnicity, religion, class, nationality etc. Finally, the narrative of the Canaanite woman is a story of the enduring *struggle of persevering faith*. One's ethnicity or religious tradition is not a hindrance to anyone, who has faith in Jesus to be accepted by him. In fact, in Mt's Gospel this pagan mother stands as an icon of unwavering faith in contrast to the people of Jesus' hometown who reject him (13:54-58), and in contrast to the disciples, who vacillate between deep faith and little faith (14:30-31). One who has deep faith and is in great need, God cannot but be merciful.

### c) *By his Person*

Jesus not only taught and preached about mercy, but lived it himself. There was no discrepancy between his words and actions, therefore what he preached about mercy, he embodied it himself. The Gospels narrate how Jesus is moved by compassion, when he encounters a leper (Mk 1:41); or meets the widow of Nain, who lost her only son and moved by compassion, he raises her son back to life (Lk 7:13); he is also full of compassion, when he sees the crowd who are like sheep without a shepherd (Mk 6:34); likewise, he shows compassion to two blind men, who plead for mercy (Mt 20:29-34); similarly, he never refuses to those who cry out, "have mercy on me" (Mt 9:27; Mk 10:47).

Further, he reveals the tenderness of divine mercy, when he invites the people, “Come to me, all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me; for I am gentle and humble in heart and you will find rest for your souls” (Mt 11:28-29). These words of gentleness and comfort could only have come from someone, who truly knew and lived what mercy and compassion were all about. Mercy is never directed inwardly, but it is gratuitously given. Therefore, Jesus’ existence filled with mercy and compassion was totally for others.

### Conclusion

The Gospels in general and Synoptics in particular present several ‘mercy’ texts that show how God’s tender mercy was made manifest in Jesus, who by his words (sayings and parables), by his deeds (healing and miracles) and by his very person became the embodiment of divine mercy. He not only accorded pardon to those in wrong, but also showed kindness to those in need, thus recognizing the urgency of mercy for sinners in his public ministry. The Gospels are only later accounts of his life that record his words and deeds of mercy, but to those who knew him, lived and walked with him and experienced his care and compassion, Jesus himself was, indeed the *Gospel of Father’s Mercy*.



# For Showers of Mercy We Plead Mercy and Compassion in Interfaith Perspective

Francis Gonsalves

During this 'Jubilee Year of Mercy' the rank and file of the Catholic Church, worldwide, have been reading, reflecting upon, and responding to, the challenges posed by Pope Francis so as to truly become a 'Church of Mercy'. In this ecclesial endeavour, it is vital to realize that mercy and compassion are virtues that belong to the common heritage of the world's religious traditions. Beginning with reflections on the centrality of mercy and compassion in the Abrahamic religious traditions, the author highlights their importance in the Indic religious traditions, as well. Finally, he argues that mercy and compassion are treasured as human values beyond religions. Thus, we need to commit ourselves to a 'globalization of compassionate solidarity' in our common quest to build communities of peace, forgiveness and harmony. The author was formerly Principal and Professor at the Vidyajyoti College of Theology, Delhi. He currently lectures at Jnana-Deepa Vidyapeeth, Pune.

## Mercy and Compassion: The Confluence of Creeds

One of the hymns sung during liturgical or sacramental services is the popular '*Showers of Blessing*', which expresses the concrete reality of God's graces in our world, today, as well as future hope that God will continue being generous in pouring blessings upon us. The words of this hymn are expressive of what we urgently need: "*Showers of blessing we need. Mercy drops 'round us are falling; but, for the showers we plead.*" Indeed, in order to build global communities of peace and prosperity, what we need is not little droplets of mercy from those who care, but 'showers of mercy' and 'oceans of nectar-

compassion',<sup>1</sup> which all religions uphold as ideals, but is so sparingly sought and grudgingly given. This article examines the virtues of mercy and compassion from an interfaith perspective - viewing how the world's major religions endorse them in one way or the other. The first part will focus on the Abrahamic religions, while the second will deal more specifically with the Indic religions. Finally, the third part will argue that even beyond the purely religious realm, all will agree that what we need today is mercy and compassion in large measure if we are to build world family characterized by forgiveness, reconciliation, peace and prosperity.

## Part I

### Mercy as Womb-Like Love in the Abrahamic Religions

In our daily conversations we use many words which are seemingly synonymous with mercy: pity, sympathy, empathy, compassion. Though these words may be loosely used in our everyday exchanges, there are shades of meaning which distinguish one word from another.

#### Pity, Sympathy, Empathy in Relation to Mercy and Compassion

Pity is a feeling of sorrow towards someone who suffers. We see beggars or handicapped persons by the roadside and feel sad for them. We may throw a coin to them and probably thank God that we are not beggars or handicapped. One who pities others may even do a little bit to alleviate their suffering. However, pity could evoke feelings of superiority and could make one feel like a patron and benefactor of those who are pitied. In the long run, pity is not constructive and neither engenders conversion and change in the one who pities nor in those pitied.

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<sup>1</sup>Geshe Kelsang Gyatso, *Ocean of Nectar: Wisdom and Compassion in Mahayana Buddhism*, Delhi, Motilal Banarsidass Publishers Pvt., Ltd., 2000, considers compassion as nectar-panacea for all societal ills. It is "like the seed, like water for growth, and like ripening for long enjoyment .... Without great compassion we would not work continuously for the sake of others, and so would not fulfil the purpose of attaining Buddhahood." (p.23).

'Sympathy' and 'empathy' are stronger in meaning and evoke greater care, concern and commitment. Sympathy is a feeling '*with*' someone who is badly off in one way or another. For example, when the mother of a friend dies, we will probably go to her/his house and offer our 'sympathies'. We do feel '*with*' her/him since we have been in similar situations and know how painful it is to lose a loved one. Sympathy normally leads to action that can be helpful for the other. For instance, in the concrete case of the death of a friend's mother, we might promise to send her/him food until such time that s/he is able to come to grips with the loss and resume normal life, once again. Finally, empathy is a feeling '*into*' or getting '*into*' the skin of one who suffers. Empathy leads to action that enriches both parties, since both are deeply touched and affected. Empathetic actions are never concerned about benefit for the self, but are always selfless and other-oriented.

While pity, sympathy and empathy are used in our daily conversations, they are not much used in the moral, spiritual and scriptural spheres, where we often use 'mercy' and 'compassion'. Notably, these two words are frequently used synonymously though one can draw distinctions between them. Mercy has moral and legal content. One can plead for mercy from a judge or file a 'mercy petition'. Mercy is forgiveness of wrong - the 'being good' to someone who does not really deserve it. It is seen in parents' attitude towards wayward children or in God's attitude towards sinners. By contrast, compassion is a deep 'gut level' feeling for others who suffer or are deprived of something. For example, we may feel great compassion for the severely malnourished infants of Africa or the child labourers of Asia, but are not 'merciful' to them since these children have not offended us. Conversely, a judge might be merciful to a criminal and revoke a death sentence without feeling compassionate towards him.

### **Judeo-Christian Roots of Mercy and Compassion**

Moving beyond the common nuances of mercy and compassion, and delving into their biblical roots, we become aware of many significant facts. First, although difficulties arise when we translate biblical terms from their original Hebrew and Greek into English, we

can surmise that 'mercy' occurs approximately 150 times in the Bible, while 'compassion' appears some 50 times.<sup>2</sup> Second, the theological formula that appears about a dozen times in the Bible describing God as: "merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness" (Ex 34:6. Ps 86:15; 103:8, etc.) seems to summarize who God *is*: Mercy! Third, the Hebrew *hesed* is often translated as 'mercy' but it is also translated as 'lovingkindness' and 'goodness'. Thus, there is a close connection between mercy and love, with love being the final fulfillment of mercy. Fourth, the invisible God's love and mercy is incarnate or 'made fleshly visible' in Jesus' life, teachings and actions. Fifth, the Greek *splagchnizomai* - literally, to be moved in one's bowels or intestines - is characteristic of Jesus, who either provides for the poor or forgives sinners. In all the above, mercy and compassion are seen as heart-felt, gut-level emotions that always fructify in action favouring the poor, the needy and the sinner.

While a 'father image' or 'male terminology' for God is largely adopted for our prayer life and religious discourses, the Hebrew word for 'mercy', i.e., *rahamim* is etymologically related to the word *rehem*, meaning, 'womb'. In Hebrew religious consciousness, then, "the meaning of mercy is rooted in and clarified by the root *rehem* - womb. Thus, a whole range of merciful affectivity associated with *rahamim* is, as it were, tightly associated with what might be called 'womb-like' love."<sup>3</sup> In using images, symbols, similes and metaphors for God, we must be aware that our God-talk is, always and everywhere, *anthropomorphic* (literally, 'man formed'). Down through the ages patriarchal systems and structures have drawn up discourses, painted pictures and suggested symbols of God deeply dyed in male/patriarchal colour and contours. These should be complemented with biblical

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<sup>2</sup> See Leland Ryken, James C. Wilhoit, and Tremper Longman III, eds., *Dictionary of Biblical Imagery*, Illinois and Leicester: InterVarsity Press, 1998, pp.547-548, s.v. 'Mercy'.

<sup>3</sup> See J. Sheila Galligan, "Mercy's Mystery: Womb-Like Love," in *Spiritual Life* 56/1 (Spring 2010), pp.49-55, who examines four specific ways in which merciful love can be appreciated as a form of 'womb-like' love.



imagery of God as mother, nurturer, feeder, nurse, midwife, etc.,<sup>4</sup> so as to get a rounded image of God who is beyond gender.<sup>5</sup>

Reflecting upon mercy as a form of 'womb-like love' can give us deeper insights into the nature of mercy; for, in biblical imagery, the womb is not merely a bodily organ or a receptacle for reproduction but evokes myriad meanings: symbolic, metaphorical, analogical and transcendental.<sup>6</sup> Indeed, at a most primordial level, God is the sole author of life whose Womb, figuratively speaking, brought forth the world. Then, womb is the place of the origin of life which God can "open" (as in the case of Rachel in Gen 30:22) or "close" (as in the case of Hannah in 1 Sam 1:5) or reach, so as to delicately "knit together" forms of life (Ps 139:13). The womb is also a place of sacrificial love oriented towards nurturing the weak and vulnerable and a place of relationship where human life is sown through spousal love that will eventually flower in loving God (vertical) and all of creation (horizontal). Finally, the womb is a place of welcome, which militates against the 'culture of death' that Catholicism strongly opposes.<sup>7</sup>

### Pope Francis: Mercy as Visceral Love

In the current 'Year of Mercy', with his Bull of Indiction entitled *Misericordiae Vultus*, Pope Francis puts the spotlight on 'faces of mercy' - uppermost among which are the merciful faces of Jesus and Mary who, conjointly, give visibility and voice to the face of God, the

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<sup>4</sup> God is referred to as 'father' in the First Testament about 22 times in images, similes and metaphors (see, for example, Deut 32:6; 2 Sam 7:12-15; Is 64:6-8; Ps 89:26-29, etc.). God is also compared to a mother, nurse, feeder, midwife, etc. (See Deut 32:18; Is 49:15; 66:13; Hos 11:4; Ps 22:9, etc.).

<sup>5</sup> See my article 'God's motherly embrace,' written in the context of International Women's Day, which can be accessed on the web-link <http://www.asianage.com/columnists/god-s-motherly-embrace-839>

<sup>6</sup> See Leland Ryken, et al., eds., *Dictionary of Biblical Imagery*, p.962, s.v. 'Womb'.

<sup>7</sup> For more details, see J. Sheila Galligan, *ibid.*, pp.51-54. In his writings, John Paul II often spoke of the 'culture of death' referring to many antilife forces like abortion, IVF, artificial insemination, cloning, etc.

“Father of mercies” (1 Cor 1:3). In a casual and commonsensical tone, the Pope begins with an assertion: “Jesus Christ is the *face of the Father’s mercy*. These words might well sum up the mystery of the Christian faith.”<sup>8</sup> Who would doubt this? Isn’t the core of Christian revelation condensable in the statement: God *is* Love-Mercy-Compassion? However, lest we get entrapped or enraptured by illusory images of some Platonic, merciful God dwelling ‘up there’ in the highest heavens, Pope Francis brings God down-to-earth by asserting (*MV* 6; italics added):

The mercy of God is not an abstract idea, but a concrete reality with which *he reveals his love as of that of a father or a mother*, moved to the very depths out of love for their child. It is hardly an exaggeration to say that this is a “*visceral*” love. It gushes forth from the depths naturally, full of tenderness and compassion, indulgence and mercy.

Indeed, every truly merciful and deeply compassionate act must overflow from a maternal-paternal movement of the heart, from a womb-like love, from a churning of the intestines, a gut-level, visceral feeling for those who suffer or have sinned. This was Jesus’ feeling when he mercifully forgave sinners and compassionately catered to the poor and the ‘least’. Without such a God-like visceral love, all manifestations of mercy are but mirages or dewdrops, at best, and patronizing poison, at worst.

### Allah, Most Merciful: The Name of God in Islam

Similar to Judaism and Christianity, Islam teaches that Allah is The Merciful One. In prayer and meditation, among the 99 names of Allah that are commonly invoked, are the names *Al-Rahman* and *Al-Rahim*.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> See Pope Francis’s Bull of Indiction entitled ‘*Misericordiae Vultus*’. This document will hereafter be abbreviated as ‘*MV*’. These words are the opening lines of *MV* n.1.

<sup>9</sup> This detail is also noted by Pope Francis in *MV* n.23 as follows: “Among the privileged names that Islam attributes to the Creator are ‘Merciful and Kind’. This invocation is often on the lips of faithful Muslims who feel themselves accompanied and sustained by mercy in their daily weakness. They too believe that no one can place a limit on divine mercy because its doors are always open.”

Both these names are derived from the root '*rh*m', referring to a host of meanings, including, as we noted earlier, the word for the womb. '*Rhm*' suggests tenderness, kindness, gentleness, forgiveness, mercifulness and benevolence. Since the name *Al-Rahman* does not only mean 'The Merciful One' but also 'The Source of All Mercy', no person can ever be named *Al-Rahman*. At most one can be named *Abd Al-Rahman* 'servant of The Merciful'. Significantly, Allah gives Prophet Mohammed the name *Al-Rahim* in the Quran describing him as "full of kindness (*ra'uf*) and mercy (*rahim*)."<sup>10</sup> What is predicated of Mohammed is also said of other prophets like Nuh, Ibrahim, Musa, Zakaria and Isa.

Of Allah's all-inclusive mercy, the Quran explicates: "He encompasses everything in mercy (*rahma*)". Consequently, since Allah is Creator, Allah also demands that all people embrace as many creatures as possible with the bonds of mercy. Indeed, from the Quran and Hadiths of the Prophet it is clear that dealing with others compassionately is indispensable for salvation. This enjoins on the believer four tasks: a) to live in gratitude [*shukr*] for Allah's mercy, b) to ask for more of Allah's mercy [*du'a*], c) to beg forgiveness for one's forgetfulness and cruelty [*istigfar/tawba*], and d) to live intensely in mutual compassion [*tarahum*].

Christian-Judaic-Islamic interreligious dialogue can be greatly fostered if the leaders and adherents of these three major Abrahamic religions tap the treasury of their scriptures for common motifs and beliefs. Fifty years ago, Vatican Council II declared:

This sacred Council remembers the spiritual ties which link the people of the New Covenant to the stock of Abraham. The Church of Christ acknowledges that in God's plan of salvation the beginning of her faith and election is to be found in the patriarchs, Moses and the prophets. ... The Church cannot forget that she received the revelation of the Old Testament by way of that people with whom *God in his inexpressible mercy* established the ancient covenant.<sup>11</sup>

<sup>10</sup> See Holy Quran 9:128.

<sup>11</sup> See VC II's 'Declaration on the Relation of the Church to Non-Christian Religions,' *Nostra Aetate*, n.4.

Of Islam *Nostra Aetate* n.3 specifically states: "The Church has a high regard for Muslims. They worship God, who is one, living and subsistent, *merciful and almighty*, the Creator of heaven and earth, who has also spoken to men [*sic*]." One can see that God's 'mercy' and 'merciful' attributes are common to these three religious traditions. These commonalities of belief are translatable into concrete common actions for the ennoblement of society, at large.<sup>12</sup>

## Part II

### Cords of Compassion in the Cosmic Creeds

With a strong focus on the Divine Being as revealed by their scriptures and prophets, the so-called Abrahamic or Prophetic religions derive their vision and mission of mercy from the very nature of Yahweh-God-Allah who *is* Love-Mercy-Compassion. From this foundation, since God created human beings, the divine attributes like love, mercy and compassion become God's gifts to humankind. In contrast, rather than endorsing compassion as an attribute of God, the Asiatic - particularly Indic religions like Hinduism, Buddhism, Jainism - focus on shared '*being*' or '*inter-being*'. The Life of all living beings demands deep respect and nurturing. These religions preach that compassion must flow from the basic premise of reciprocity, that is, the realization that as much as one wants to avoid pain and live in peace and prosperity, everyone and everything else yearns for the same, too.

### **Daya as the Hindu Dharma to Divide and to Share**

In Sanskrit, the words *karuna* and *daya* are synonyms for mercy or compassion. The *Brhaspati Smṛti* text of classical Hinduism of perhaps the 6<sup>th</sup> century teaches: "Complete love belongs to one who always delights in behaving towards all beings as equal to the self, for

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<sup>12</sup> See, for instance, Maurice Borrmans, "A Light in the Inter-Religious Christian-Islam Dialogue: the Virtue of Compassion," in *Dolentium Hominum* 46/1 (2001), pp.61-65, for a personal, experiential account of how a hospital in Ain Sefra, Algeria, became "a holy temple of a merciful compassion in which Christians and Muslims [could] say many things under the gaze of God." Quote from p.61.



their good and for their welfare.”<sup>13</sup> Other Hindu texts like the *Raghuvamśa* (2.11) and the *Hitopadeśa* (1.60) remind us that authentic *daya* is not dependent on the virtues of the being to which it is addressed; for, “Good people are compassionate even of beings that have no value.”<sup>14</sup> This is reminiscent of Jesus’ teaching to love even one’s enemies and not just one’s family and friends. While one might translate *daya* - as in the injunction: “*Daya karo!* Be merciful!” - to only refer to some sentiment, the word actually implies the deep desire welling up in the heart to remove the hardships of others, even if it implies great effort and sacrifice. Its semantic field is therefore not that of sentiment, but of active desire to help others. In Rīgvedic use, the verb ‘*day dayate*’ would imply to divide, to distribute, to allot, to share and to partake of. Therefore, it means actively getting involved and sharing in the pain and suffering of others.

Mata Amritanadamayi - known as the ‘Hugging Amma’ - can be given as an example of love and compassion. At the 2<sup>nd</sup> Parliament of World Religions held in Chicago in 1993 she said: “We have forgotten the love, compassion and mutual understanding taught by religion. The basic cause underlying all the problems that exist in the present day world is the lack of love and compassion. Love and compassion, alone, will wipe out the darkness, bringing light and purity to the world.” She added, “To show compassion towards suffering humanity is our obligation to God. Our spiritual quest should begin with selfless service to the world.”

### **Karuna as the Cornerstone of Buddhism**

In his book ‘The Heart of Compassion’, His Holiness the Dalai Lama writes: “It can be asserted rightly that loving-kindness and compassion are the two cornerstones on which the whole edifice of

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<sup>13</sup> For further details, see George Gispert-Sauch, “*Daya*,” in *Gems from India*, ed. idem., Delhi, ISPCK/VIEWS, 2006, pp.149-151. The original Sanskrit reads as: “*Atmavat sarvabhūteru yad hitaya śivaya ca / vartate satatam hrsto kṛtsna hy esa daya smṛta.*”

<sup>14</sup> Ibid., p.151. The original Sanskrit reads as: “*Nirguṇeśv api sattveśu dayam kurvanti sadhavaḥ.*”

Buddhism stands.” Compassion for others is one of the central teachings of Mahayana Buddhism wherein one sacrifices oneself in order to attain salvation for the sake of other beings.<sup>15</sup> Nonetheless, the self is also important since all of existence is regarded as interdependent and unless one has exercised self-restraint and developed self-awareness, one can never expect to reach out in compassion to others. The Buddha preached that one must never neglect one’s own welfare (*attha*), which one must use by analogy to understand what the other’s welfare consists in. Later, one must progress from the limited love of one’s family and friends to the larger love of all creatures and of all of creation. Buddhism thus preaches that compassion (*anukampa*) is a universal ideal without boundary or limitation.

Buddhism does not merely teach compassion as a value to be attained, but advocates firsthand, direct experiences: “Contemplative reflection on the suffering of living beings is not enough; we must help diminish suffering through compassionate involvement.... The lotus flower grows most beautifully when planted deep in the mud.”<sup>16</sup> However, such involvement must not be equated with aimless social activism; but is born out of a liberated state of mindfulness that is the fruit of spiritual disciplines like the practice of *vipassana*,<sup>17</sup> and *upaya*.<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> Gyatso, *Ocean of Nectar*, *ibid.*, pp.20-21, differentiates between the compassion of Hinayana and Mahayana Buddhism. Providing the analogy of a child who is drowning, he opines: “Hinayanists are like onlookers who want that the child be saved, but do not take that responsibility upon themselves. Mahayanists, on the other hand, are like the mother, for not only do they [*sic*] want all living beings to be free from suffering, they also take personal responsibility for protecting them.”

<sup>16</sup> See Thich Nhat Hanh, *Interbeing: Fourteen Guidelines for Engaged Buddhism*, rev. & ed. F. Eppsteiner, Berkeley, California, Parallax Press, 1993, p.18.

<sup>17</sup> Steve & Rosemary Weismann, *Meditation, Compassion & Lovingkindness: An Approach to Vipassana Practice*, Delhi: Sri Satguru Publications, 2000, pp.25-31, 193-194, hold ‘compassionate understanding’ as the final fruit of *Vipassana*.

<sup>18</sup> John W. Schroeder, *Skillful Means: The Heart of Buddhist Compassion*, Delhi, Motilal Banarsidass Publishers Pvt., Ltd., 2000, for details on the subject.

## Jainism's All-Embracing *Jiva Daya*

Jainism propagates compassion and care for every living being, even microscopic insects. The Jain *jiva daya* tenet stresses compassion towards everyone and everything. Closely connected to the practice of *daya* is *ahimsa* (non-violence). All being (*sar*) is divided into nonliving (*ajiva*) and living (*jiva*) forms. While we might regard rocks, lakes and trees to be nonliving (*ajiva*), according to Jainism all these have the life force of *jiva*.<sup>19</sup> Ancient Jain texts explain that it is the intention to harm, the absence of compassion, which makes an action violent. Without violent thoughts there can be no violent actions. When violence enters one's thoughts, the Jain is exhorted to remember Lord Mahavir's words: "You are that which you intend to hit, injure, insult, torment, persecute, torture, enslave or kill." When one enters the other's skin, so to say, one will desist from harming the other(s). Furthermore, one will positively strive to cultivate an attitude of amity (*maitri*) towards all forms of life.

Without going into details, we see that religions of the Far East like Confucianism and Taoism too speak of compassion in various ways. For instance, Confucius' social philosophy largely revolves around the concept of *ren*, meaning, 'compassion' or 'loving others'. Cultivating or practising *ren* involves deprecating oneself. Those who have cultivated *ren* are, "simple in manner and slow of speech." (*Lunyu* 13.27).<sup>20</sup> For Confucius, such concern for others is demonstrated through the practice of forms of the Golden Rule: "What you do not wish for yourself, do not do to others." In similar vein, Tao Teh Ching asserts: "The sage has no interest of his own, but takes the interests of the people as his own. He is kind to the kind; he is also kind to the unkind: for Virtue is kind. He is faithful to the faithful; he is also faithful to the unfaithful: for Virtue is faithful."

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<sup>19</sup> See C.D. Sebastian, "Ahimsâ and Compassion in Buddhism and Jainism," in *Jnanatirtha Journal of Sacred Scriptures* 3/1 (January-June 2009), pp.32-34, for details.

<sup>20</sup> See basic tenets of Confucianism at the web-link: <http://www.cabrillo.edu/~cclose/docs/Confucianism.pdf>.

### Part III

## Mercy and Compassion beyond Creedal Confines

In the foregoing analyses, we have seen how mercy and compassion are understood in the Abrahamic and Indic religious traditions, whose teachings have not remained theoretical, but have animated the lives of renowned world leaders. The Indic focus on respect for life and compassion towards all living beings inspired Mahatma Gandhi to translate the ideals of *daya* and *karuna* into political praxis by evolving strategies of nonviolence (*ahimsa*). Moreover, *ahimsa* inspired the likes of Martin Luther King, Jr., and Nelson Mandela, who adopted similar strategies in their own contexts. The principle of *ahimsa* is based on the basic premise that the life of all creatures - especially human beings - is sacred and cannot be destroyed by violence. Nonetheless, in the struggle for justice and truth (*satyagraha*), one must be ready to suffer and bear pain oneself. This is where the need of self-sacrifice arises.

Self-sacrifice - which, in the extreme, entails even giving one's life for the welfare of others - is at the heart of all discourses on mercy and compassion. The rationale behind this thinking is simple: If I deeply desire the other's welfare, I will shed my ego, inconvenience myself, and reach out compassionately to help others. This is simply 'self-emptying' or what in theological terms is *kenosis*. Jesus summarized the kernel of *kenosis* by saying: "No one has greater love than this, to lay down one's life for one's friends" (Jn 15:13). *Kenosis* is the attitude of emptying oneself to embrace the other and promote life. It roughly parallels the *shunyata* of Buddhism, as well as Hinduism's ideals of *tyaga* (sacrifice), *vairagya* (renunciation) and *karuna*. Likewise, agnostic philosopher Vattimo speaks of 'weak ontology' of divine *kenosis* that is needed to respond to suffering humanity amidst the evils of secularization.<sup>21</sup> Ironically, this 'weak ontology' is a strength; for, it takes great faith and fortitude to give one's life for another. Such a

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<sup>21</sup> Gianni Vattimo, *Belief*, trans. L. D'Isanto & D. Webb, Cambridge, Polity Press, 1999, pp.20-68, develops the idea of *kenosis* within a secularist context as an antidote against suffering in the world.



disposition is not only found among those who are 'religious', but among all those who dare to stand in solidarity with those who suffer.

Today, we concretely experience what Pope Francis has termed the 'globalisation of indifference'.<sup>22</sup> Huge sections of society are excluded, exploited and doomed to die slow deaths due to unjust, inhuman practices, on the one hand, and widespread apathy and indifference, on the other. In the face of this cancerous development, there is need to foster a 'globalization of compassionate solidarity'<sup>23</sup> that will feel the suffering of crucified humanity at the gut-level, and reach out with commitment to alleviate suffering and pain. Such solidarity will only be possible if we understand the root causes of the maladies that plague the poorest of poor. This creates the need for "knowing together" whereby: "We compassionately understand each other, our points of view, including those of the ones we confront and in the process our points of view become circles of view capable of more generous embrace."<sup>24</sup> History shows that socio-religious movements have responded effectively to global indifference in diverse contexts.

## Conclusion

All religions teach, in one way or the other, that mercy and compassion are spiritual powers based on one's right relationship with oneself, with others, with all of creation and with God. The power of compassion is unleashed only if one 'feels' the suffering of the other as if it were one's own suffering. This first gut-level feeling is a form of knowledge - accessible to all - that engenders action. When one feels/knows the others' pain and suffering, one moves to alleviate that pain and suffering. Whether one takes action as a result of religious motivation

<sup>22</sup> See his *Evangelii Gaudium*, n.54, as well as *Laudato Si'*, n.52.

<sup>23</sup> See Filo Hirota, "Globalization of Compassionate Solidarity: Challenges and Opportunities," in *East Asian Pastoral Review* 38/4 (2001), pp.351-365, as a response of 'religious' towards building a more humane world.

<sup>24</sup> See Ananta Kumar Giri, "Knowing Together in Compassion and Confrontation: Social Movements. Gift of Knowledge and Challenge of Transformations," in *Jeevadhara* 39/229 (January 2009), pp.88-95; quote from p.89.

or mere humanism is unimportant. What is crucial, however, is that through merciful, compassionate actions we shall be able to tell those who suffer that we are *with them*. Wouldn't our concerted efforts to raise up those overburdened with suffering ensure that 'showers of mercy' rain down upon us, thereby irrigating our hearts so parched with indifference?

# Responding to the Ecological Crisis Based on the Biblical Creation Stories (Gen 1:27-28)<sup>1</sup>

Selva Rathinam

In this article the author speaks of God's compassion who has provided what we need for our healthy life in our environment. However, the author highlights the environmental injustices done especially to the poor on account of the greediness of the affluent nations. He cites Pope Francis' encyclical '*Laudato Si*' which challenges the world community to act on behalf of the poor by offering three principles - solidarity, justice, participation. The Biblical Worldview provides, according to the author, the value based on human response to today's ecological crisis and he substantiates it by revisiting the theology of Genesis creation stories. Dr. Selva Rathinam, SJ holds a doctoral degree in Biblical Theology from the Jesuit School of Theology, Berkeley, USA and he is at present the President of Jnana Deepa-Vidyapeeth (JDV), Pune.

"The earth provides enough to satisfy everyone's need, but not everyone's greed": Gandhi.

## Introduction

Etymologically 'ecology' is linked to the Greek metaphor *oikos* meaning 'house' or 'household' and epistemologically it evokes the meaning of the health of the whole household of God.<sup>2</sup> Each one has a

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Paper read at 7<sup>th</sup> International Innsbruck-JDV Conference on "Ecology from Theological, Philosophical and Spiritual Perspectives" held at Jnana Deepa Vidyapeeth (JDV), Pune, India, 18-21 September 2015.

See M.N. Pillay, "The Church and the Environment: On Being down to earth in a Consumerist Era," *Scriptura* 107 (2011), 184.

right to be in a safe and healthy place to live, learn and work. This place should have enough resources for all at present and in the future. No one should bear the brunt of “the negative environmental consequences resulting from industrial, land-use planning and zoning; municipal and commercial operations or the execution of federal state, local and municipal programme and policies.”<sup>3</sup> This is what is meant by environmental justice. But there are many people especially the poor and the marginalized who are the victims of environmental injustices. In very many major cities in India and in our own backyard Pune and neighborhood Mumbai a vast majority of people living in slums experience the effects of environmental pollution and degradation although they themselves produce the least waste. Often times the government is least concerned about the environmental equity.<sup>4</sup> In the past years I accompanied some of the Jnana Deepa Vidyapeeth (JDV) students who went for weekend ministries in the neighborhood slums in Pune. Occasionally I accompanied the visiting foreign students from the USA to these slums here. What I noticed in those slums were the stagnant water and the waste products surrounding them sending out the nauseating stench and the host of mosquitoes into the tents of those slum dwellers. In my frequent visit to Perumalmalai a hill station in Tamil Nadu for my Zen retreats I had seen the rainforests being replaced by Eucalyptus oil trees and food ingredients to fetch commercial profit to the land owners. When one travels anywhere in Chennai one could breathe the polluted air with foul smell resulting from air pollution from traffic and factory pollution from waste products running like waters towards the sea. Prophet Amos warns us, “let justice roll down like waters” (Am 5:24). Amos also speaks about the shift of cultivation from staple food of wheat and barley to

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<sup>3</sup> G.A. Mwayuli and M.M. Kadenyi, “Environmental Justice for Peace and Development: A Biblical Perspective,” *African Ecclesial Review (AFER)* 52:1 (March 2009), 532.

<sup>4</sup> See [thelawdictionary.org/environmental-equity](http://thelawdictionary.org/environmental-equity) accessed on 9/19/2015 where it is said that it refers to equitable sharing of environmental impacts by a community. Environmental policies and laws strive to ensure that no one group bears a larger, unfair share of harmful effects from pollution or environmental hazards.



luxury items of grapes and olives for wine and oil, so that the rich can drink wine from bowls (Am 6:6). No wonder “the developing world feels the effects of global warming through flooding and drought yet it is the industrialized nations who produce most of the polluting wastes about global warming.”<sup>5</sup> That is why on September 16, 2015 during a morning audience at the Vatican with environmental ministers of European Union member states Pope Francis, according to Brian Roewe, challenged them to act for the poor by offering three principles - solidarity, justice, participation - to guide the international community toward “effective collaboration” toward the collective goal of caring for the earth: On solidarity, the pope said it is known that the poor are most vulnerable to environmental degradation and suffer most from its consequences. Solidarity, for him, means the implementation of effective tools that are able to fight environmental degradation and poverty at the same time, as for example the development and transfer of technologies that make efficient use of resources to the local level. On justice, Francis drew attention to the idea of an “ecological debt” he spoke about in his encyclical, *Laudato Si*. He said that we must honor this debt by setting a good example: limiting in a big way consumption of non-renewable energy; providing resources to countries in need for the promotion of policies and programs for sustainable development; adopting appropriate systems for the management of forests, transportation, waste; seriously addressing the grave problem of food waste; favoring a circular model of economy;<sup>6</sup> encouraging new attitudes and lifestyles. On participation, Francis said it requires the involvement of all stakeholders including those typically on the margins. Current times, he said, have provided humans with “unprecedented power” through science and technology, but at the same time it requires an integral and inclusive vision to wield it properly.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> G.A. Mwayuli and M.M. Kadenyi, “Environmental Justice for Peace and Development: A Biblical Perspective.” 533-34.

<sup>6</sup> A circular economy is one that is waste-free.

<sup>7</sup> See Brian Roewe, “Francis stresses Solidarity, Justice, Participation in address to EU Environment Ministers,” *National Catholic Reporter* (September 11-24, 2015), accessed 20 September 2015; available from <http://ncronline.org/blogs/eco-catholic/francis-stresses-solidarity-justice-participation-address-eu-environment>; Internet. 1.

The human response to ecological crisis should be made in the context of a human value system. This human value system, for a believing Christian lies in the context of a Biblical Worldview. Since very many critics attack on the Judco-Christian Tradition for its 'bulldozer mentality' on its view of nature we need to trace back to Genesis 1 and see whether such a charge is open to question today.<sup>8</sup> Earth has provided food, clothing and shelter to humanity for ages.<sup>9</sup> When such mother earth is subjugated, she cries for eco-justice. The revisit of Genesis 1 in this paper is a response to such a cry.

### 1. Revisiting Dominion Theology (Genesis 1:27-28)

"God created humankind in his image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them. God blessed them and God said to them, "Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth and subdue it; and have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the air and over every living thing that moves upon the earth." (Gen 1:27-28)

This biblical text has exerted enormous influence upon how we understand ourselves and how we understand our relation to God, to other human beings and to the world around us.<sup>10</sup> There are two verbs in this passage which attracted the attention of the Christian writers when discussing on Ecology: one is the verb "subdue" from the Hebrew *kavash* and another one is the term "dominion" from the Hebrew verb *radah*. I would like to approach these verbs from three angles: what is in the text, what is behind the text and what is before the text.

#### a. What is in the Text?

The history of interpretation of these words gives rise to two different meanings which are diametrically opposed to each other. For some

<sup>8</sup> C.E. Armerding, "Biblical Perspectives on the Ecological Crises," *Journal of the American Scientific Affiliation* 25.1 (March 1973), 3-4.

<sup>9</sup> S. Thomas, "Our Response to Ecological Crisis," in S. Thomas and K.P. Mathew (ed.), *A Christian Response to Ecological Crisis* (Tiruvalla: Christava Sahitya Samithi, 2009), 28.

<sup>10</sup> T. Hiebert, "Rethinking Dominion Theology," *Direction* 25:2 (1996), 16. Accessed 20 September 2015; available from [www.directionjournal.org/25/2/rethinking-dominion-theology.html](http://www.directionjournal.org/25/2/rethinking-dominion-theology.html); Internet.

'dominion' (*radah*) means 'to dominate' and come to the conclusion that this has led to the attitude of the 'exploitation' of the environment.<sup>11</sup> Others say that 'dominion' here means to take responsible care<sup>12</sup> of creation and thus it leads to the attitude of 'stewardship' and add that in the context our authority seems to be derived from good God (*elohim*) who alone created the human beings in God's own image and directly unlike all other life which originates from the earth (Gen 1:20, 24, 26). The image of God does not mean participation in the essence of God but in God's function or task and thus to act as God's representative on earth and this implies not absolute but delegated authority.<sup>13</sup> God created everything as good (Gen 1:4, 10, 12, 18, 21, 25) and even very good (Gen 1:31). The occurrence of it seven times in the First Account of Creation (Gen 1:1-2:4a) implies that God created an ordered universe and it is the God-given task of humans to preserve this order.<sup>14</sup> Since it is a delegated authority we need to do justice to the intention of God to establish a harmonious ecosystem while dealing with the creation. Such focused limited authority of human rule is also implied when God made the two great lights to rule (*malak* and not *radah*) the day and the night (Gen 1:16-18) and the same can be said when God gave only plants for food and not the animals so that the humans may not use their authority in an unrestraint manner to kill and eat them (Gen 1:29-30).<sup>15</sup>

But unfortunately *radah* (dominion) "occurs frequently in descriptions of military conquest, where it is paired with such verbs as "destroy" (Num 24:19) and "strike down" (Lev 26:17; Is 14:6). When used of

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<sup>11</sup> See L. White Jr., "The Historical Roots of Our Ecological Crisis," *Science* 155 (March 10, 1967), 1203-1207.

<sup>12</sup> See B. Anderson, "Human Dominion over Nature," in *From Creation to New Creation: Old Testament Perspectives* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1994), 111-131.

<sup>13</sup> P.A. Bird, "'Male and Female He Created Them': Gen 1:27b in the Context of the Priestly Account of Creation," *Harvard Theological Review* 74 (1981), 29-59.

<sup>14</sup> See Rui de Menezes, *The Global Vision of the Hebrew Bible* (Mumbai: St Paul Press, 2009), 32-33.

<sup>15</sup> The vegetarianism of the first humans is relaxed after the flood (cf. 9:1-7).

the Israelite kings, *radah* always refers to dominion over his enemies, not to rule over his own Israelite subjects, for which the verb *malak*, "reign", is the usual term."<sup>16</sup> Even in other places where the verb *radah* is employed (Lev 25:43; 26:17; 1Kgs 5:16; 1Kgs 4:24) *radah* always signifies the authority, power and control of one over another.<sup>17</sup> "The verb *kavash* is even more forceful than *radah* describing the actual act of subjugation, of forcing another into a subordinate position. It is used for military conquest...to depict the destruction and occupation of conquered territory (Num 32:22, 29). It is also used of the king's forcing his people into slavery against God's wishes (Jer 34:11, 16), and of rape (Esther 7:8; Neh 5:5)."<sup>18</sup> The above analysis proves beyond doubt that "the human race is positioned at the top of hierarchy of creation by virtue of its divine image and its divine mandate to rule over the earth"<sup>19</sup> and if so the theology which is portrayed here is the theology of human dominion. However, we will be able to understand it properly only when we understand it by going behind the text.

### ***b. What is behind the Text?***

There are three contexts to Genesis 1:28 which bears these two verbs *kavash* (to subdue) and *radah* (to have dominion): agrarian, priestly and canonical.<sup>20</sup>

#### *i. Agrarian Context*

The ancient Israelite society lived on preindustrial subsistence agriculture.<sup>21</sup> They cultivated on the rocky slopes of the hill country and were dependent on the non-cooperative earth and unpredictable

<sup>16</sup> T. Hiebert, "Rethinking Dominion Theology," 18.

<sup>17</sup> T. Hiebert, "Rethinking Dominion Theology," 18.

<sup>18</sup> T. Hiebert, "Rethinking Dominion Theology," 18.

<sup>19</sup> T. Hiebert, "Rethinking Dominion Theology," 19.

<sup>20</sup> I basically follow here the trend of analysis of Hiebert, "Rethinking Dominion Theology," 19-23.

<sup>21</sup> Subsistence agriculture is self-sufficiency farming in which the farmers focus on growing enough food to feed themselves and their families having a range of crops and animals just needed to feed and clothe themselves during the year.



rain fall. This implied a hard work on the rocky soil to produce and to survive. In such situation we can understand how the human task was considered to be overpowering or "subduing" (*kavash*) the earth. In the same token the verb "to have dominion" (*radah*) is used (and not *malak*) in the sense of ruling over enemies. Thus, the use of the above verbs arose not out of the arrogance of human power but out of the recognition of human powerlessness before the powers of nature. In the First Account of creation the de-divinization of the natural elements is an attempt to liberate human beings from the oppression and tyranny of a multiplicity of gods or demons identified with natural elements like the Sun, the Moon and the Stars (Gen 1:16) or light and darkness (Gen 1:1-5) two subsisting principles (cf. Is 45:7).<sup>22</sup> Thus, in the ancient agrarian context those two verbs were highly liberative. But in today's context what comes before the text is not a powerless humanity before the powers of nature but an industrial, technological and scientific humanity having power over nature. This calls for a new interpretation of the dominion theology.

## ii. Priestly Context

There were three kinds of leadership in ancient Israel: priestly, kingly and prophetic to which sometimes added the wisdom teachers as a separate leadership. The priests were religious leaders associated closely with the kings and mediated God's presence to the people (Lev 8-9). Perhaps this plays a role in the portrayal of the human representing God and mediating God's rule in the Priestly account of Genesis 1. Such understanding may at first look contradictory to the previous agrarian context where the human came across as powerless. But deeper analysis will show that here, too, the humans were essentially powerless before the powers of nature but in the priestly theology one way to sustain the human survival is to gain control over the nature through the priestly authority in the cult. Thus, the "human authority over the world of nature reflects the priestly authority in the cult."<sup>23</sup> As we have seen so far in both the above contexts what we come

<sup>22</sup> Rui de Menezes, *The Global Vision*, 32.

<sup>23</sup> T. Hiebert, "Rethinking Dominion Theology," 22.

across is the dominion theology of Genesis 1. The same theology of the humans is also found in other parts of Scripture like Psalm 8.

### iii. Canonical Context

When we come to the third canonical context we move out of the dominion theology and come to a distinctive theology of dependence or servanthood. There are two creation accounts in the book of Genesis juxtaposed to each other: one is the priestly account of Genesis 1 and the other is the Yahwistic account of Genesis 2-3. The second creation account is not a continuation but an alternative to Genesis 1. Here the human is made not in the image of God establishing hierarchical superiority but out of the clay (Gen 2:7) like any other living being forming a part of the whole (Gen 2:9, 19) and even the divine breath blown into his nostrils is the same as that of the animals (Gen 2:7; 7:22). The task of the humans is neither to subdue (*kavash*) nor to have dominion (*radah*) but to serve (*abad*) even like a slave (Gen 12:16; Ex 4:23) and protect (*shamar*) the earth (Gen 2:15; 3:23). Here the land is not inhospitable and hostile *tohu* (chaos or desert wastes) to be subdued (*kavash*) or dominated (*radah*) but it is a 'garden of pleasure' (*gan ha eden*) for humans with rain and streams of water for agricultural purposes; while the First Account stresses more the equality of the sexes for the purpose of the propagation of the human species, the Second Account stresses the mutual complementarity providing each other companionship; while the Sumero-Akkadian myths mention only 'the tree of life', the Second Account mentions two trees in the garden representing the unmerited gifts of life and morality which distinguish humans from the animal kingdom and since humans are created free the question of morality arises.<sup>24</sup> Therefore the theology of the human in the Second Account of creation, according to Hiebert is not a theology of dominion but a theology of dependence which is also found in other parts of Scripture like Psalm 104 and the Book of Job.<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>24</sup> Rui de Menezes, *The Global Vision*, 36-37.

<sup>25</sup> T. Hiebert, "Rethinking Dominion Theology," 23.

### *c. What is before the Text?*

When we go behind the two Accounts of Creation we come across with two theologies: theology of dominion and theology of dependence. Now what is before the text is the ecological crisis of today. How are we going to respond to the ecological crisis of today from the Scriptural point of view? And for this we need to take both the theologies seriously. After all, the editors of the accounts of creation preserved both of them side by side. Today we humans believe that we have the ability to control nature for good or for ill. "We have the ability to enhance human health and longevity, and also the ability to destroy the human race entirely with nuclear armaments and wastes. In such a context, it seems reasonable -even necessary- to fashion a theology of human power exercised benevolently for the good of creation, that is, a dominion theology in a stewardship mold which many have seen in Genesis 1."<sup>26</sup> On the other hand, we are also aware of the fact that we are neither divine nor demons but we are humans, "a single species in a large and complex web of life we do not entirely understand and can never really control."<sup>27</sup> Even before we humans appeared on earth the web of life functioned beautifully and even without us it may do well in the future but if 'we' want to survive our only hope is "in recognizing our dependence on this web of life and adapting our behavior to conform to the process created into it and to the demands it makes upon us. In such a context, it seems reasonable - even necessary- to fashion a theology of human dependence, like that in Genesis 2, in which we conceive our responsibility as one of service within the world of God's creation."<sup>28</sup> Today this second view is most important because the focus on the dominion theology of Gen 1:28 in the past has made us so proud and self-centred "that has allowed us to exploit nature for our ends and has brought upon us the ecological crisis we now face. Perhaps what is most needed in our day is not a new view of power, a sanctified dominion theology, but rather a new humility, a new sense of our dependence...a new "decentering" by which we read our texts and

<sup>26</sup> T. Hiebert, "Rethinking Dominion Theology," 23.

<sup>27</sup> T. Hiebert, "Rethinking Dominion Theology," 24.

<sup>28</sup> T. Hiebert, "Rethinking Dominion Theology," 24.

our lives from the point of view of the whole of creation rather than from our human perspective alone.”<sup>29</sup>

## 2. The Indian Context<sup>30</sup>

### *Early Indian Thought*

This theology of dependence on creation is very Indian. At the opening stage of Vedic literature the Indian Sages looked at the world in a cyclic perspective. The rain (*parjanya*) is sent from heaven or by god. The rain gives forth food (*anna*) on the earth. The result of this food is the survival of human (*purusha*). The human offers in thanksgiving sacrifice (*yajna*) which is taken up by the air to god (*brahma*) who survives on it and once god is satisfied the god sends rain and thus the cycle of the survival of the whole cosmos, human and god continues. This cycle is called *yajna chakra pravartana* (the wheel of sacrifice in motion). Here everything depends upon everything else and this cycle goes on and on and never ending. Here the human is only a part of the whole of cosmos. The human is not above but a part of cosmos. In this process human is heading towards bondage because of his work. Work leads to bondage whatever it may be, according to the Indian Vedic Thought. This is called Karma theory. Does it mean that the human has to give up the work? No. Since everything depends upon everything else the contribution of the human work for the welfare of the whole (*lokasangraha*) is necessary. According to Karma theory, it is the fruit of the work that leads one to bondage. In trying to solve the problem of bondage the Indian Philosophy makes a subtle distinction between the work and the fruit of the work. What is necessary is not *karma thyaga* (sacrifice of the work) but *karma phala thyaga* (sacrifice of the fruit of the work). When we selfishly hold on to the fruit of the work it leads us to bondage. That is why we need *nishkamakarma* according to *Bhagavad Gita* where Krishna suggests that we have rights only on the work or the action,

<sup>29</sup> T. Hiebert, “Rethinking Dominion Theology,” 24.

<sup>30</sup> See my article on “Justice, Peace and the Integrity of Creation: A Biblical Perspective,” *Vidyajyoti Journal of Theological Reflection* 77:2 (February 2013): 136-154 where I have elaborated the Indian ecological reality under the title of Integrity of Creation.



and not on its results, whether it is good or bad. Our works, our desires should be “desireless” and we should not desire for any pleasing (or unpleasing) result.<sup>31</sup> This is the theology of dependence needed to respond to the ecological crisis today.

## Conclusion

Pope Francis through his encyclical *Laudato si* (On the Care of Our Common Home) draws our attention to the need for reconciliation with creation. The conclusions drawn from the analysis of the Creation Accounts remind us of the “three specific themes raised by the Holy Father: deepening our gratitude to God for the many gifts of creation (praise); appreciating the interconnectedness of all things (integral ecology); and becoming healers of a wounded world (practical steps).”<sup>32</sup> The Jesuit Conference of Asia Pacific in Siem Reap, Cambodia on July 17, 2015 elaborated further the practical steps as “little daily actions” like a secure water supply for all; planting in order to cool down the earth’s atmosphere; the recycling of resources and rubbish to counter the effects of a “throwaway culture”; partnership with all people of good will; assisting local bishops by contributing to a deeper theology and spirituality of ecology; promoting education towards the “ecological citizenship”; concern for creation in our interreligious dialogue and collaboration; encouraging families and religious in our pastoral ministries to live a life of greater simplicity; continuing to examine in our regions: migration; pollution; nuclear power; sustainable energy; stewardship of resources, the dignity of every human person; and finally as we seek a genuine change of heart, focusing our attention on the needs of the poor, who suffer the effects of climate change and economic injustice most starkly and in holding them close, we will only draw closer to the poor and humble Christ.<sup>33</sup>

<sup>31</sup> See “Nishkam karma of Bhagavad Gita,” accessed 20 September 2015; available from <http://www.swamivivekanandaquotes.org/2014/05/nishkam-karma-of-bhagavad-gita.html>; Internet, 1.

<sup>32</sup> See Jesuit Asia Pacific Conference, “Statement on *Laudato si*” accessed 21 September 2015; available from <http://sjapc.net/content/statement-laudato-si>; Internet, 1.

<sup>33</sup> See Jesuit Asia Pacific Conference, “Statement on *Laudato si*.”

# Compassion as Commitment to Christian Life

## A Theological Response to the Challenge of *Evangelii Gaudium*

M. Surekha

According to the author the modern context provided in the encyclical *Evangelii Gaudium* (EG) becomes a challenge for an ongoing mission of mercy for today's Church and it is grounded in the compassionate ministry of Jesus. Within the Biblical and theological understanding of mercy, the author identifies Jesus as the embodiment of God's mercy. Taking a cue from EG the author develops compassion as theological praxis for Christian life which necessarily involves an expression of the experience of God who is merciful. Sr. Surekha, BS is a doctoral research scholar who is at present writing her thesis in Systematic Theology at Jnana Deepa Vidyapeeth (JDV), Pune.

Jesus must always be at the centre. Intimacy with him is the heart of all we do and are; the heart into which we wish to welcome others. Our inspiration and the treasure we long to share is the joy of the Gospel of Jesus Christ. We do not look to sociology, philosophy or any political ideology to explain why we must be a poor church for the poor. We look to Christ who reveals to us the face of God the Father of mercies.<sup>1</sup>

This passage is an excerpt to the foreword by Cardinal Vincent Nichols, Archbishop of Westminster to a new book edited by Giuliano

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<sup>1</sup> Cardinal Vincent Nichols, Archbishop of Westminster, "Foreword" (ed.) Giuliano Vigini, *Pope Francis, The Church of Mercy: A Message of Hope for all People*, (Bangalore, India: Asian Trading Corporation), xii. In *The Church of Mercy*, readers get a first-hand look at Pope Francis's vision of the good news of Christian hope and mercy.

Vigini, *Pope Francis, The Church of Mercy*.<sup>2</sup> With the approach of the Extraordinary Jubilee of Mercy, offers us a *kairos* for new precision and clarity. Indeed, it is our Pontiff's wish that the Jubilee be a living experience of the closeness of the Father, whose tenderness is almost tangible, so that the faith of every believer may be strengthened and thus testimony to it be ever more effective. In his apostolic letter proclaiming the Jubilee (*Misericordiae Vultus*), Pope Francis invites all to "gaze more attentively on mercy so that we may become more effective sign of the Father's action in our lives" (# 3).

The modern context presented in the *Evangelii Gaudium*<sup>3</sup> becomes a challenge for an ongoing mission of mercy for today's Church grounded in the prophetic but compassionate ministry of Jesus. It is in this context that I find commitment to lead a merciful life has its source in personal encounter with Jesus, the compassion of God made human. When one is compassionate, one does not decide, but rather surrenders control to another, and is sucked into the situation. One becomes so present to the moment that one is both chosen and choosing.

Taking delight in the *kairos* moment, I as a member of a religious Congregation of the Sisters of the Little Flower of Bethany, whose charism is deeply incarnational, rooted in the humanity of Jesus, this seems so obvious, that there is nothing more important than venturing into a deeper understanding of the mercy of God.

## 1. Theological and Biblical Understanding of Mercy

Mercy is a concept integral to an understanding of God's dealings with humankind. From a theological perspective the characteristic of mercy is rooted in God and experienced in relation to God, from whom it may be acquired as a Christian virtue and exercised in relation to fellow human beings.<sup>4</sup> In the Bible a variety of Hebrew and Greek

<sup>2</sup> Cardinal Vincent Nichols, Archbishop of Westminster, "Foreword" (ed.) Giuliano Vigini, *Pope Francis, The Church of Mercy: A Message of Hope for all People*. (Bangalore, India: Asian Trading Corporation), xii.

<sup>3</sup> *Evangelii Gaudium* is the first apostolic exhortation of Pope Francis, published on 24<sup>th</sup> November, 2013. Here after *EG* will be used to indicate *Evangelii Gaudium*.

<sup>4</sup> Colin Brown, *The New International Dictionary of New Testament Theology*, (Grand Rapids, Mich: Zondervan Pub. House, 1975), 2:593-601.

words are used which fall within the general semantic range of the English word "mercy." They include such terms as "loving-kindness" (Hebrew = *hesed*), "to be merciful" (Hebrew = *hanan*), "to have compassion" (Hebrew = *riham*), and "grace" (Greek = *charis*). In the OT, mercy (in the sense of loving-kindness) is a central theme; the very existence of the covenant between God and Israel was an example of mercy, being granted to Israel freely and without prior obligation on the part of God (Ps. 79:8-9; Isa. 63:7).<sup>5</sup> With the new covenant the mercy of God is seen in the death of Jesus Christ; the sacrificial death is in itself a merciful act, demonstrating the divine compassion and making possible the forgiveness of sins. From this fundamental gospel, there follows the requirement for all Christians, who are by definition the recipients of mercy, to exercise mercy and compassion toward fellow human beings (Matt. 5:7; James 2:13).<sup>6</sup> In the New Testament grace is intimately bound up compassion and with what God has done for people through the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Here grace (*hesed*) is an expression of God's mercy, love and kindness toward all, without the least thought of merit on the part of individuals. Grace is God's free and unmerited way of dealing with sinful people.

In the light of the foregoing discussion, we may conclude that a cursory glance at the biblical words translated as "mercy and compassion" could be summarized under three basic truths: a) Mercy springs from the heart of God<sup>7</sup> b) that mercy manifests itself in God's *steadfast love* and in the incarnation of Jesus Christ and in his suffering together with us and for our salvation, c) that mercy is to be the hallmark of God's people. Throughout Christian history the awareness of the continuing human need for divine mercy has remained as a central part of Christian faith.

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<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

<sup>6</sup> W. L. Reed, *Journal of Biblical Literature*, (Chico, Calif.: Scholar's Press, 1881), 23:35-41.

<sup>7</sup> When God first describes himself to humans, he says, *The LORD, the LORD, the compassionate and gracious God, slow to anger, abounding in love and faithfulness* (Ex 34:6 NIV). Without God's intervention, the world would not know compassion



## 2. Jesus: The Embodiment of God's Compassion

In Jesus, God's compassion became visible and tangible to us. Jesus not only said, "Be compassionate as your Father is compassionate," but he also was the concrete embodiment of this divine compassion in our world. By entering into our world and becoming one of us, Jesus accepted humankind's weakness and revealed to us God's ineffable love. "Jesus identifies Himself with the poor and the oppressed, in order to show them an active and effective concern".<sup>8</sup> Jesus' response to all those who came to him with their suffering - the hungry, the blind, the widows, the public sinners, and those afflicted by leprosy - was to reveal the divine compassion that led God to enter our humanity. The mystery of the Incarnation empowers us and teaches us the virtues that generate life and compassionate love. God in Jesus becomes a 'servant God' who washes the feet of his disciples; He identifies Himself with every human suffering and completes His self-gifting love by dying on the cross. Even from the cross, He forgives those who crucified Him. In this way, we see in Jesus the fullness of God's compassion.<sup>9</sup>

Thus, the biblical words translated as "compassion" could be summarized under three basic truths: a) that compassion springs from the heart of God. Without God's intervention, the world would not know compassion. b) Compassion manifests itself in God's *steadfast love* and in the incarnation of Jesus Christ and in his suffering together with us and for our salvation, and c) that compassion is to be the hallmark of God's people. The call to solidarity and the rooting of this solidarity in God's own self in Trinity and in the person of Jesus can do great things for the Kingdom of God.

## 3. Situating the Context:

### The Crisis of communal Commitment

Taking a few cues from the responses to *Evangelii Gaudium* from persons in different walks of life, we find that it is no surprise that the

<sup>8</sup> George M Soares-Prabhu, "Jesus and the Poor," in *Collected Writings of George M. Soares - Prabhu*, Vol. 4. ed. Francis X. D'Sa (Pune: JDV Theological Series, 2001), 176.

<sup>9</sup> Cf. Joseph Prasad Pinto, OFM Cap, *Journey To Wholeness: Reflections for Life in Abundance* (Bombay: St. Pauls, 2006), 186.

Catholic Church faces monumental challenges in today's milieu. Focusing on the contemporary issues presented in the *Evangelii Gaudium* this section describes the various problem issues under four significant headings: a) The great divide of our time b) Estrangement from others c) Spread of a throwaway Culture d) An era devoid of God-consciousness. In that case, what should be our response to the reality that is presented before us? Does the plight of the poor and the marginalized, touch us deeply, causing us in some way to feel their pain within ourselves? The central challenge of the contemporary world is how to turn communal commitment into solidarity with others, solidarity with the margins.

#### 4. Compassion: A Theological Praxis of Christian life

The ultimate foundation of Christian's commitment to liberation can be found in the Trinity understood as mystery of communion among distinct persons. The Son was sent into the world in order to divinize human beings; moreover, the goal of the Trinity is to draw every human being to itself so that everyone may participate in its inner life. Therefore, compassion is a profound biblical word with a clear theological identity. Compassion is a ministry which for the Christian is entirely and uniquely rooted in Jesus Christ. As disciples with our identity hidden in Jesus, our compassion is a participation in his compassion. Compassion is the overflow of our life in Christ. Relationship with Jesus Christ is the necessary condition that makes compassion possible for us. Growth in compassion is the fruit of our life in Christ.<sup>10</sup>

However, mission needs contemplation that can sustain the fervour and zeal of a Christian till the end. Pope Francis insists that evangelizers need "an interior space which can give a Christian meaning to commitment and activity"<sup>11</sup> Our cultural milieu poses challenges to the reform the Pope envisions. Is compassion, which is a part of what it means to be a Christian, possible for us? The current task is to interpret this demand of the new *kairos* in the light of the biblical and theological

<sup>10</sup> Andrew Purves, *The Search For Compassion: Spirituality and Ministry*, (Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1989), 56-57.

<sup>11</sup> *Evangelii Gaudium* # 262.



tradition and provide a conceptually coherent, systematic mediation between the context of globalization and the demand of its inherited faith.

#### 4.1 *Contemplation of the Divine*

One of the main challenges that the Church is facing today is to instill God-consciousness. God is more to be experienced than to be intellectually known. Through contemplation we truly become whom we contemplate and whom we are all meant to be. For, whether we realize it or not, it is in God's love, and in our loving response in prayer and service, that we live and move and have our being.

#### 4.2 *Image of God and Compassion*

Christian theology ponders over the meaning of human life in reference to God. The image of God has an irreducibly social expression within humanity.<sup>12</sup> It is a 'relational' image, reflected in the relationship between man and woman, in the primordial social bond that is the foundation of all other forms of social life. Only within an interpersonal community can the triune likeness be properly realised. If humans are made in the image of the Triune God, all that of the Trinity is also to be affirmed of the human person. We are to see the Trinity, in the words of Raimundo Panikkar, as "the ultimate paradigm of personal relationship."<sup>13</sup> John Macmurray rightly points out that, since mutuality is constitutive of the personal, it follows that 'I' need 'you' in order to be myself. "The authentic human is not egocentric but exocentric."<sup>14</sup> To be a person after the image of God is therefore to be a person-in-relationship.

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<sup>12</sup> The Yahwist and Priestly accounts of creation in the Bible affirm that human beings are created in the image and likeness of God: "Let us make human in our image, after our likeness" (Gen 1:26).

<sup>13</sup> Raimundo Panikkar, *The Trinity and the Religious Experience of Man* (New York/London 1973), xii-xiii. The understanding of Trinity and one's religious experience influence each other bringing about a better understanding of the human relationship.

<sup>14</sup> John Macmurray, *Persons in Relation* (reprint, London: Humanity Books, 1998), 69. Macmurray does not connect the relational character of the human person with the doctrine of the Trinity.

powerful religious experiences and the sense of awe. The New Testament clearly teaches how to love by his word, and deeds. Jesus the mercy of God. Getting in touch with Jesus, not a way of getting to know him. "Reflecting in the first, Jesus' message of love. Francis, Abbot, Lombardi, the bishop of the Pope writes: "It is a word that finds it so difficult to believe. The new Pope wanted to show the same proclamation as two thousand years ago, that this mercy is not a sentiment but a person. His very speaking way of reaching incarnation - was a personal action - he held his arms in front of him and moved a thought, looking a baby and said, "Our Lady, hold in her arms the mercy of God made man."

A Christian is embodied in Christ through baptism, empowered in the light of Christ through confirmation, and called upon to act in the world. During the years, prophets and poets of Christ and so, like Christ, to be open, honest, to fellow humans, loving each and every one around him/her and indeed all humans, whose fundamental identity is embodied in Jesus the perfect image of God. From a Catholic theological perspective, all persons possess an intrinsic dignity and inalienable worth. Therefore, compassionate care for people is part of the understanding of keeping God's commandments. Compassion is part of what it means to be a Christian. In other words, compassion is one of the features of being "in Christ."

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St. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, Question 100, Article 1, ad 2.  
 Saint Mark's Press, 1990, p. 21.  
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